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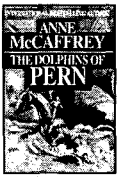


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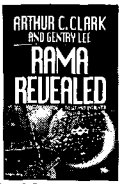


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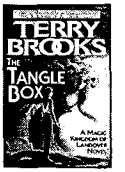


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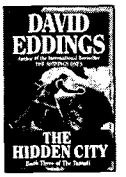


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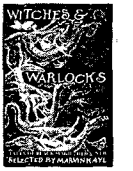


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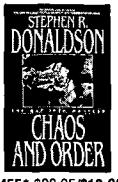


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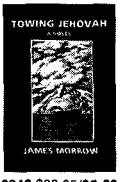


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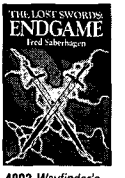


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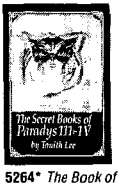


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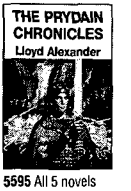


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## SCIENCE FICTION

Vol.18 No. 15 (Whole Number 225) Mid-December 1994
Next Issue on Sale December 6, 1994

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Cover design by Terri Czeczko

Cover illustration for "Werewolves of Luna" by Chris Moore


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Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260657. POSTMASTER, send change of address to Asimov's Science Fiction, Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. ISSN 1055-2146. GST #R123293128

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# REFLECTIONS by Robert Silverberg

## CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

So Michael Fay has finally been given his punishment—"taken it like a man," his father said—and now is healing. And, we may reasonably believe, he soon will sell movie and book rights to his ordeal for millions of dollars, which will prove instructive to all of us in the matter of crime and punishment.

You remember Michael Fay, don't you? He was the eighteen-year-old American boy found guilty of vandalizing parked cars in Singapore, and, under Singapore's Draconian code of laws, was sentenced to six strokes of a rattan cane. That touched off weeks of furious controversy around the world, Presidential appeals for clemency, and debates about the nature of jurisprudence in the United States and abroad. Practically the whole armamentarium of current American therapeutic mythology was brought forth in the hope of winning mercy for him. In the end—so to speak—young Fay's sentence was reduced from six strokes to four, the caning was duly carried out, and the world moved on to other equally grave matters.

From the point of view of the science fiction aficionado, the Fay case is of interest because it demonstrated—right here on our own little planet—the sort of clash of alien cultures that has featured so extensively for many years in our field.

Singapore, a small but prosperous Asian city-state, is a squeaky-clean place with one of the most stringent criminal codes on Earth. As we have seen, spray-painting a few automobiles is considered heinous enough there to draw a sentence of months in prison and a painful, humiliating whipping. Overstaying a visa will get you caned also; so will rape. Littering in the streets is punishable by a heavy fine. Traffickers in drugs are executed. These tough laws, laid down in the 1960s by Singapore's stern prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, have reduced serious crime there almost to zero. It is one of the safest places in the world. Nor have the Singaporeans risen in wrath against their severe code of laws; Lee Kuan Yew governed the country to the apparent satisfaction of its people for close to thirty years, and even after his retirement remains the most powerful



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figure in the land.

And then we have the United States—a nation proud of its enlightened Constitution and its reputation for justice. Despite the philosophical profundity with which the American legal system has evolved over the past two hundred years—or perhaps because of it—something odd seems to have happened to American justice in recent years. Our jails are full, but crime remains rampant. Esoteric theories of legal reasoning have sprung up, by which two young men who murdered their wealthy parents for their money have been able to convince juries that they were simply doing it in self defense, and the assassin of the Mayor of San Francisco and a second important city official was let off with a five-year sentence after demonstrating that an addiction to junk food caused him to lose his ability to tell right from wrong, while a murderer who casually killed a couple of boys because he wanted the hamburgers they were eating managed to stave off execution for close to fifteen years after conviction by arguing that he had had an unhappy childhood.

The unfortunate Michael Fay chose to have a little harmless American fun, romping through the streets with some of his friends with a spray-paint can, marking up cars (and, apparently, stealing a few things from them). Unhappily for him, he had his fun not in Los Angeles, Miami, or Seattle, but in Singapore, where he and his

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mother had lived for several years, and where all sorts of unsparing legislation awaits the practitioners of all sorts of antisocial behavior. Somehow he came under suspicion of vandalism. He was duly arrested, interrogated, tried and found guilty, and sentenced to be caned.

Caning, as it is practiced in Singapore, is a disagreeable experience. A brawny martial-arts expert wields the instrument of punishment, and the canee not only suffers considerable pain, but is usually left permanently scarred. Amnesty International considers it to be "cruel, inhuman, and degrading." This leaves the Singaporeans untroubled. Even in that relatively crime-free land, laws are occasionally broken, and last year about a thousand miscreants there were subjected to caning.

So far as I know, nobody in the United States said boo about all those canings. We didn't know they were happening; but if we had, very likely we would have shrugged and said that the strange legal practices of Singapore were the problem of the Singaporeans, not our business at all. We are, after all, very much concerned with issues of multiculturality these days: surely the citizens of Singapore ("persons of color," by the way, in modern terminology) are entitled to enact a legal code in accordance with their own cultural beliefs, right?

Right. Until an American boy got entangled in their legal system.

Our multiculturalists suddenly were hard pressed to defend the cultural autonomy of Singapore, whose laws now had to be damned as "cruel, inhuman, and degrading." Caning was singled out as a barbaric punishment. And tenderhearted folk everywhere called for mercy, pointing out that this had only been the Fay boy's first offense, after all, as though the first one *ought* to be free.

As the campaign for clemency intensified, young Fay's parents began to apply characteristic modern American methods of pleading for mercy. Their son, they said, hadn't even committed the crime —his confession had been forced out of him by the brutality of his interrogators. And in any case he should not be held responsible for his actions, because (as a Boston psychiatrist declared in a thirteen-page diagnosis made without benefit of an interview with Fay), the boy suffers from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, a neurological condition typified by excessive restlessness and poor concentration. In other words, the lad had spray-painted those cars in an absent-minded moment, barely aware that under the quaint laws of Singapore he was committing a crime.

Even worse, the psychiatrist observed, caning Fay would "result in permanent and irreparable physical and mental harm to him," severely impairing his ability to function in adult society, and there was a "grave risk" that it would drive him to suicide. There was talk of "post-traumatic stress dis-



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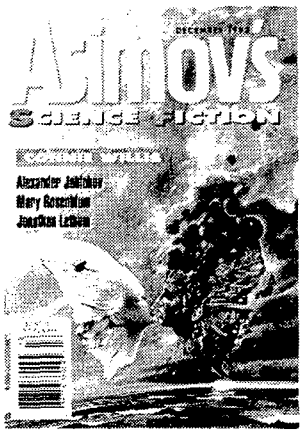


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order" and much else.

Singapore was unimpressed. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder seemed to them just one more imaginary American ailment; the kid had painted the cars, and that was that. If getting punished was going to upset him, so be it: that was what punishment was supposed to do. As for the alleged barbarism of the Singaporean penal code, why had no one in the West spoken up on that topic before? Was it only when *white* buttocks were in jeopardy, the Singaporeans asked quite openly, that caning became "barbaric"? So they went ahead, one morning in May, with the caning of Michael Fay. He reported that it had been "not as bad" as he had expected, told his anguished mother "not to worry" about him, and—let us hope—is now getting on, sobered and enlightened, with the rest of his life.

Cases analogous to that of Michael Fay used to be familiar stuff in science fiction, long ago when the world was simpler. The settings were always extraterrestrial, but they were straight transpositions of the imperialist/colonist experience. We wrote of the clash of cultures between "Earthmen" (read "white Anglo-Saxon males") and "aliens" (what we formerly called "natives"). The aliens had one kind of law code, Earthmen had another, and the conflict of the story arose from the clash between them. The benighted alien folk usually ended up learning a thing



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or two from the Earthmen about how best to run their lives.

I wrote a couple of those myself, nearly forty years ago. The first was called "The Overlord's Thumb" —a story about an Earthman on an alien world who unwittingly desecrates a holy shrine while on a botanical field trip, and kills a "native" who is unhinged enough by the desecration to attack him. The aliens aren't overly concerned by the killing, but they demand redress for the desecration (the picking of a sacred flower) *under their own laws*—trial by ordeal. The commander of the Earth expedition, though a military man, is a sensitive type who has studied anthropology, and after some heavy breathing he turns the botanist over to the aliens, whose idea of an ordeal is to throw the miscreant into a lake. He is a good swimmer, and comes out safely. But the sensitive commander reflects that he has now established a precedent that will be binding on Earthmen everywhere, subjecting them to the laws of the planets they are exploring.

John W. Campbell, the editor to whom I took the story, was a hard-nosed type who believed in the innate superiority of all Earthmen and disliked my namby-pamby conclusion. He rejected my story (I sold it elsewhere) and had me write a sequel to it ("Precedent") in which a different expedition from Earth *deliberately* violates a taboo on another alien planet where trial by combat is the rule, then sends a professional boxer out to beat the daylights out of the champion named by the aliens—thereby showing the simple-minded natives that "if you wanted to be treated like equals, you have to face the consequences." I was young and needed to pay the rent, so I wrote the story, which Campbell liked so much that he featured it on the cover.

I know which of the two stories is closer to my own philosophical position. But I *do* believe that anyone who ventures into alien territory ought to obey the laws of that land, or pay the price. And so I felt Michael Fay got what was coming to him in Singapore. Whether we would do well to horsewhip a few malefactors in our own country is a separate issue. Probably not, I suppose—although my own car, parked in front of my house in a pleasant suburban neighborhood, was vandalized no less than four times in six months by some pleasant suburban kids a couple of years ago who went through the neighborhood doing such stuff (smashing windows, breaking aerials), and when they were eventually caught I would gladly have had them drawn and quartered. But perhaps a couple of strokes with a rattan cane would have been sufficient. ●



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# GUEST EDITORIAL by James Cappio

# SEVERAL MONTHS AFTER "TEN YEARS AFTER"

It's a pity that Pat Cadigan waited ten years to give us her refreshing take on "cyberpunk SF." Ten years earlier, "Ten Years After" might have helped stanch the flood of ink uselessly spilled on the subject. As it is, because Cadigan is not as clear as she could be about what she means by "cyberpunk," some of her more striking remarks come out sounding paradoxical or even wrong. Consider her discussion of *Time* magazine's February 8, 1993 cover story on cyberpunk:

"The first reaction I heard to the *Time* cover story within the field was: 'that must mean cyberpunk is dead for sure.' . . . People have been wishing this movement—a misnomer—dead practically from the beginning. . . . Others have tried to abort it retroactively by insisting there was never any movement in the first place and it's all just a marketing gimmick."

Problem is, such reactions are correct. Everybody knows that the institutional purpose, in late-twentieth-century American society, of a *Time* cultural cover story is the official mummification of last month's Flavor of the Month. And a warehouse full of *Neuromancer* knockoffs—many of which, deplorably, sell better than Cadigan's own seminal work—testifies to the use of "cyberpunk" as a marketing gimmick. Yet Cadigan views these sentiments as the equivalent of shouting at the moon that it is made of green cheese.

What's wrong with this picture? Simple, really: the different reactions Cadigan records are really reactions to different things going by the same overworked name. One can have them—all of them—without being hopelessly retro.

Consider "cyberpunk SF." This can be defined in two quite different ways. One is to list the cyberpunk SF writers. But everybody, like the Lord High Executioner, has a little list—and no two agree. And to combine all the lists into one big list of writers as different as Gregory Benford, Thomas M. Disch, James Patrick Kelly, Kim Stanley Robinson, Lucius Shepard, Michael Swanwick, and Connie Willis dilutes the concept of cyberpunk SF into nothing more than—surprise!—a marketing gimmick.



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As Nixon might have said, "We are all cyberpunks now."

The flip side of this adman's approach is an exclusionary, almost Stalinist crusade for ideological purity, most evident—surprise again—in those writers who conceive of cyberpunk SF as a "movement" (or "Movement"). For example, readers of the entire run of *Cheap Truth* (the fanzine that, under the pseudonymous editorship of Bruce Sterling, did most to convey the impression that cyberpunk was a Movement) can be excused if they detect a curious resemblance between Michael Swanwick and Leon Trotsky. Cadigan's evident disgust with such parochialism is the strongest thing in "Ten Years After." As the only woman writer who even appeared to be allowed to play in this sandbox, she is in an especially good position to point out the fannish, masturbatory, and, I suspect, fundamentally male character of the crusader impulse. Unfortunately, we can't simply ignore it until it goes away: the SF community's narcissistic answer to the question "What is cyberpunk?" is still to indulge its penis envy at MTV, drawing up a list of writers starting with William Gibson and stretching at least through—William Gibson.

And here is where we came in. As Cadigan says, cyberpunk "ain't just for SF any more," if indeed it ever was. Cadigan is on to something important, if paradoxical, in suggesting that SF, specifically cyberpunk SF, turns a blind and complacent eye to its roots in culture (including popular culture) as a whole. If you're young, hip, male, American, and part of a Movement—in short, too cool to live—then *of course* the general culture is following you rather than the other way around. Cadigan sensibly responds by saying, in effect: "Stick a sock in it. At both ends."

So far, so good. The problems arise only when Cadigan says what cyberpunk SF *is*. She basically has two comments. First, "Cyberpunk SF was the response to the start of the desk-top computer era—speculative fiction concerning new developments in technology." This is true and useful, since it means that cyberpunk SF *could not have been written* before the early 1980s, just as Jane Austen couldn't have written a post-Industrial Revolution novel of social criticism such as *Hard Times*. Not so Cadigan's gloss—that cyberpunk SF necessarily follows this cultural shift. Cyberpunk SF only became possible, indeed, with the commercialization of computers, but it's gone on to influence the culture that spawned it. Otherwise we would not know to follow up Cadigan's second remark—"Cyberpunk SF is SF about cyberpunk things"—with the inevitable question, "What are cyberpunk things?"

Well, we all know the answer to that one. Hypertext; cybernetics; punk; raves; brain implants; acid house; virtual reality; the Internet; virtual communities; industrial;



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cyberspace; computer viruses; The WELL; flaming; William Gibson; datacops; *Neuromancer; Interzone;* Negativland; Turing Police; *Mondo 2000;* Timothy Leary; Techno-Erotic Paganism; Temporary Autonomous Zones; artificial life; cryonics; Ecstasy; synaesthesia; virtual sex; time machines; smart drugs; rants; dystopias; simstim decks; microsofts; in short, the things mentioned in the cutesy soundbite "hypertext" sidebars of the *Time* article. That is, the article dumbs down what's now an identifiable subculture, perhaps best typified in the magazine *Mondo 2000*. But what *natural* link exists between virtuality and the Velvets that makes them "cyberpunk things"?

None, really: the constellation of "cyberpunk things," computers, networks, punk and its progeny, the fusion between humans and machines, smart drugs, virtual sex, and all that, is artificial. Although the pieces of the nebulous cultural construct we call "cyberpunk" were all in place before *Neuromancer,* the only reason we discuss them all together is that Gibson synthesized them there, so convincingly that we can tell ourselves they belonged together all along. But just saying so doesn't make them a natural combination, and if you think it does I know a king named Canute you ought to have a little chat with.

Here I part company with Cadigan. I can't agree that "[h]ad there been no SF about cyberpunk, we would still have this same cover story in *Time* magazine, probably with that same word, 'cyberpunk.' " This presupposes there is a subject matter, "cyberpunk," defined independently of cyberpunk SF, whereas in fact there's no reason to think we'd have had the same concept if it hadn't been for the SF.

Cadigan can believe that there is such a subject matter because she actually means something different by "cyberpunk": "[W]e would still have this same cover story . . . because we would still have desk-top computers, computer nets, hackers, viruses, and all the rest of it." This is but a subset of the elements of cyberpunk set forth in *Time*—the part that is inconceivable without the existence not just of computers but of *networked* computers. This shift to one sector of the cyberpunk subculture explains everything that doesn't quite jibe in Cadigan's piece. Computer networks would have existed, of course, if William Gibson had never been born. They influence science fiction, not the other way around. On the other hand, it strains credulity to imply that the "millions of people who use networks every day and never read science fiction" Cadigan invokes are cyberpunks. I doubt that the thousands of lawyers hunkered down over their LEXIS and WESTLAW terminals at the very moment you read this would recognize themselves as such.

Still, I think Cadigan is on to



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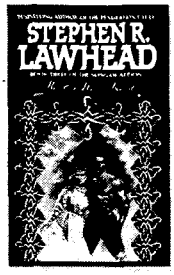


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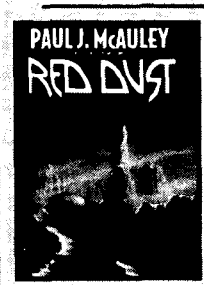


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something, for I suspect that what *Time* calls cyberpunk is unlikely to be around to greet the end of the millennium, having long since flown apart of its own accord. But having shifted the terms, Cadigan breaks off just as she is about to bring the discussion home to real issues of significance to real people—making her conclusion more disquieting than uplifting to me:

"[C]yberpunk, being a cultural shift rather than a form of science fiction, cannot be declared either alive or dead because nobody owns it.

"Nobody owns it and everybody participates."

Both sides of this hopeful coda are false. Nobody can keep track of the whole Online Nation or even its faux-anarchic subset, the Internet. But if you conclude that any segment is unowned, why are you writing General Electric, H&R Block, Sears, and IBM those checks for your GEnie, CompuServe, or Prodigy time? The Internet sprouts new commercial nodes daily—and its non-commercial segment rests on a structure created by the Department of Defense to link military computers. Just so, the desk-top computer found its first widespread applications in business, not personal use. If cultural shifts drive SF and not the other way around, it is equally true that business, commercial, and military concerns have always driven technology and that visions of technology as an aid to human flourishing come later, if at all. So it is with the networks.

Similarly, those of us who spend time online are so easily dazzled by a resource that essentially did not even exist ten years ago that we forgot how little impact it has on most people's lives. The "everybody" who participates still shows a face that is essentially middle-class, computer-literate, and North Atlantic—minorities on all counts—and the universal availability of networks won't change this *by itself,* any more than the universal availability of books means that everybody reads them.

In this context, I fear I find Cadigan's invocation of television, which does have a claim to universal distribution, a little too facile. Of course television can put us in immediate touch with the world as well as divert us from it; it brings us the news as well as *I Love Lucy*. But that point doesn't address what is for me the important issue—whether the immediacy changes people's attitudes or actions. Obviously it need not. For television brings us everything with the same emphasis. The bloodwork of factional hatred in Bosnia is no more important than Roseanne Arnold and perhaps less so than Murphy Brown. I quite agree with Cadigan that there are significant differences between people who grew up with television and people who didn't, but I am convinced that one of the most important is not positive at all—a leveling effect that re-



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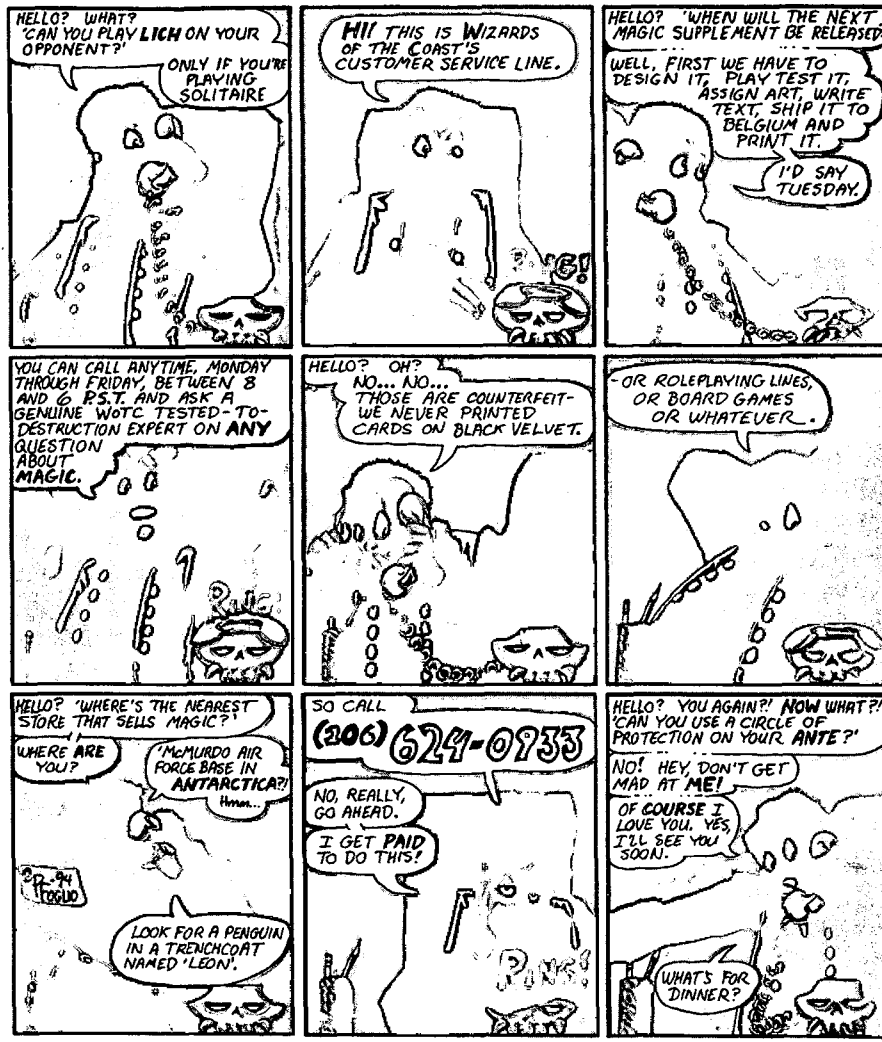
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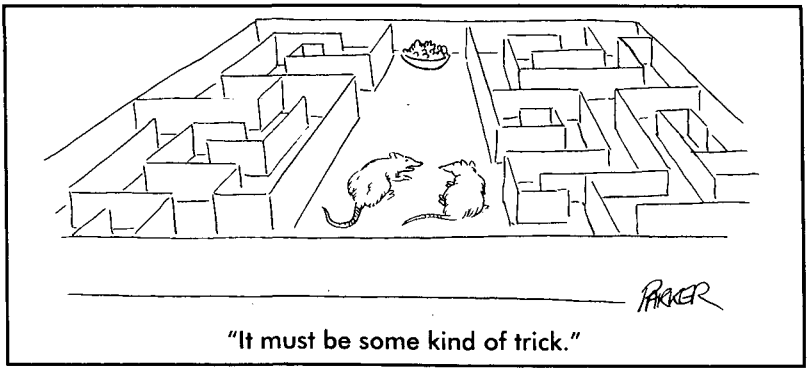
duces to the inability to distinguish between important and unimportant information.

I fear that the coming online universe will be uncomfortably like television. The problem with the Information Age is not that there's too much information—that has been true ever since the invention of writing (as Karl Popper pointed out, writing was an advance for the species precisely *because* it gave us the means of storing more information than a single human could, thus making collective knowledge possible)—but that it creates a need for new ways to sift information. With over one million unread posts on the Internet last time I looked, it's obvious that networking actually amplifies television's blurring of the line between the frivolous and the essential.

We need to provide our own filters for the crawling chaos of networked information. More than that, we really need *interaction.* This is clearly what Cadigan has in mind when she says "Everybody participates." The vision of a world in which, to put a spin on the maxim from *Gravity's Rainbow,* everyone is connected—in which people flourish by acting with other people unconstrained by the bounds of space or by fetters on expression—is indeed breathtaking. Even I am excited by it. But it is the merest utopianism if it is supposed to come about by itself rather than through the individual and collective actions of billions consciously striving to change their lives and societies. The change we need is decidedly not for the machines.

We've come to a whole different cyberspace, as it were, than the one in which there is no question more burning than whether so-and-so is a *real* cyberpunk SF writer. I hope that Cadigan will continue to explore it, as she always has in her fiction. ●

*James Cappio lives and works in New York City. He has contributed frequently to the* New York Review of Science Fiction.




"It must be some kind of trick."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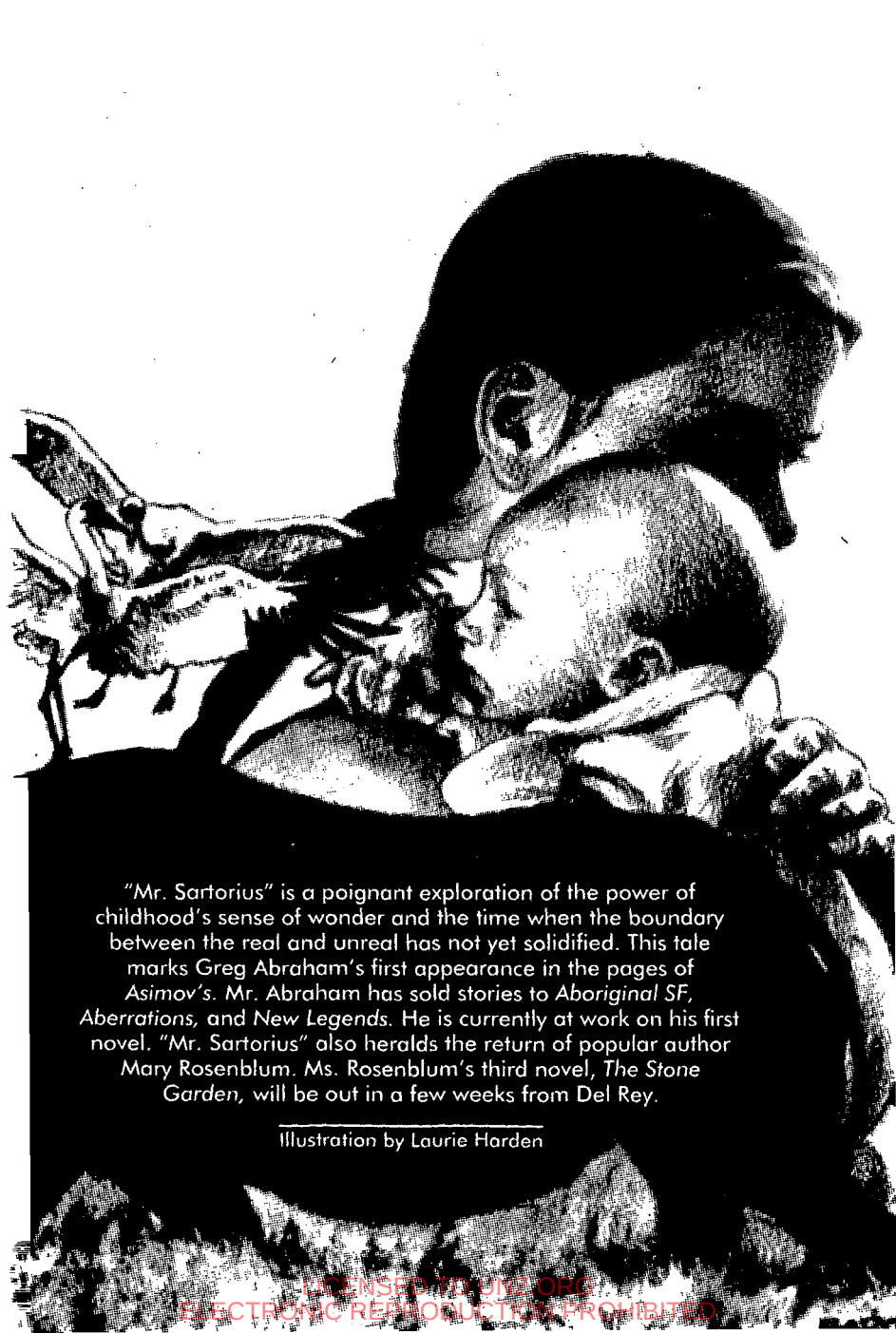

"Mr. Sartorius" is a poignant exploration of the power of childhood's sense of wonder and the time when the boundary between the real and unreal has not yet solidified. This tale marks Greg Abraham's first appearance in the pages of *Asimov's*. Mr. Abraham has sold stories to *Aboriginal SF*, *Aberrations*, and *New Legends*. He is currently at work on his first novel. "Mr. Sartorius" also heralds the return of popular author Mary Rosenblum. Ms. Rosenblum's third novel, *The Stone Garden*, will be out in a few weeks from Del Rey.

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Keller squinted against the sunset glare on the dusty windshield. He sighted stranded boxcars, huddled tents, and scrawny junipers. So, there had to be a town someplace around here. The engineers always parked the siding gypsies close to civilization. They'd go into town and slave for a few bucks, earn enough for another hundred miles of haul next time an engine deadheaded down the line. Keller reminded himself that he'd do better in town, too.

But the sun had almost set and he felt hell-hot, coated with dust and salt. He'd spent most of the day getting high enough to escape the valley dust storm, and the pickup's engine was running rough. Down below, what passed for top-soil—nothing but salt scars, really—was blowing east, and none too slow, either.

Sure, more money in town, but the gypsies would be desperate enough for a doctor that he wouldn't feel like he was just conning them. Keller put the ancient Ford into gear and lurched down the buckled service road toward the camp.

The kid burst out of a clump of dusty weeds, hurtled onto the truck's twisted bumper. Keller braked hard, steering wheel in his chest, adrenaline and anger sweating his face.

"Up the road!" the kid hollered, grinning, eyes a startling blue beneath a mop of hair bleached white as that valley salt.

"Damn near got your ass flattened and me into deep shit!" Keller yelled, suddenly shutting up in the face of the boy's excitement. Those eyes said it: this is no junker of a Ford! Naw, this is no dusty camp! The boy glanced upward, and his smile telegraphed it all. Now they were riding a spaceship in the middle of hot battle. Keller got sucked right in, remembered an instant from his own boyhood as the rush of acceleration shoved him back into his seat, made him swallow hard while blue dissolved to imagined black, to a billion stars. This evening the boy—those bright eyes blind to hazard—rode a creased bumper, and thirty years ago, for Keller, it had been a clunky second-hand bike speeding out of control down a hill. Suddenly he laughed, gripped the wheel, and gunned the engine. They dodged a silver saucer, rounded a clump of trees, and nearly ran right into camp.

"All the way—at the end of the road!" the boy hooted, scampering around the fender as Keller opened the door and eased himself onto solid earth. A few old boxcars squatted on the rusty siding. Folks had stretched ragged plastic tarps from the sides of them or pitched tents in the shelter of afternoon shade. Chickens scratched in the dust, and a gaggle of kids scrambled out of the twilight recesses.

"We're not there yet!" The boy's anxiety added a new fire to his eyes. None of the other kids' faces had that brightness. Keller hadn't thought about it before, how maybe the too-hot sun baked spaceships and wonder


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out of them early. By now the adults were sauntering up, as curious, but more wary.

" 'Lo, folks." Keller slammed the door, sending a shockwave of dust and salt sliding down the corroded paint. "Name's Vollman. Dr. Vollman. Spare me a place to sleep and maybe a drink of water?" He scanned the leathery faces. "Anybody need a look?"

"Mr. Sartorius *said* a doctor would come," the boy whispered, refusing to let the crowd push him out of the way, his eyes still glistening in a face as tanned as his hair was bleached. In all those other sun-dried faces, resignation was glossed with only a little hope, like a skim of oil on a drying puddle. Keller turned toward the utility box welded to the bed of his truck. He unlocked it, while the adults crowded around, and he agreed to look at this weepy eye, listen to a heart, check out a rash. Kids pushed like dogs among the adults' legs. The boy still kept close. As Keller fished out his medical bag, there was suddenly room to move, because now he held magic, now he held power in his hands; and the crowd shrank back a little.

Shutting the box's lid, Keller murmured, "Maybe a drink of water first?"

"Here now." A corridor opened in the mob and a woman pushed through. Old and Amerind, surely finding her first wrinkles even before the climate went to hell, she was dressed in jeans and a black sweatshirt so large it almost made her look like an Arab nomad. As she handed Keller a plastic cup half full of water, she knelt and said sternly to the boy, "Deuce, quick, tell Jenny we'll be there soon. Stay *with* her."

The boy was off with an awkward salute in Keller's direction. As the crowd, a single organism now, moved him toward shade, the woman stayed at his side and explained, "At the end of the spur—you could drive there—Jenny will have her baby soon. You could come and look?"

"I was kind of just looking for a place to sleep." They want me to be God, Keller told himself, to lay on the hands and make them well. Give them a chance, and they'd devour me. . . .

"My name is Marta. You would sleep more comfortably at the end of the spur. There's just me and Deuce and Jenny . . . and the little girl waiting to be born. I took them home with me a couple of weeks ago because things are not so good here." Marta winked. "Now I'll wait for you, Doctor." She disappeared beyond the crowd.

In an instant, Keller was wholly Dr. Vollman. The kids were passing pink-eye around. Common enough out here in the Dry, what with the blowing dust and the chronic exposure to bad water. Good old tetracycline worked, and he had lots of it, never mind that the tubes were out of date and meant for cattle. An abscessed tooth; cataracts starting in the older folks, and some of the not-so-old—thank the disappearing ozone, and he


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told them to try the nearest fed-med clinic, where they might have a few of the new artificial corneas. Keller knew that they wouldn't hand them out to siding gypsies, but you could always hope. Somebody brought him another cup of water, so tainted that he almost choked. By and large, the folks out here were dying just a little bit slower than the poisoned aquifers.

It was getting dark, and Keller felt exhausted. A bearded, round-faced man stuck out a grimy hand. "Got this sore. Won't heal." Keller looked past the nail-bed abscess, crusted and yellow, found himself looking at the man's face, studying old anger-lines grained with dirt, finding somebody *too* familiar beneath the graying hair. Keller looked down quickly and probed the puffy reddened finger, felt the smirk spreading wide in the man's filthy beard as the man said, "I know you from somewhere. Ow!"

"Relax your hand." Keller swabbed out the eroded cavity of the abscess with disinfectant. "Keep it clean, okay? You're probably going to lose the nail. Put some of this on twice a day and don't let it scab over."

"Right, *Doc*. Name's Royce." Keller looked around. The crowd was pretty much gone, an abscess not interesting enough to hold the curiosity of any hangers-on. Royce grinned. "I was thinking you were this guy I knew when I worked at the state pen in Illinois, that you were an inmate there for robbery. Busted out during the big riot, the one when a bunch of cops got killed. Woulda been kind of a twist, y'know? Him a *doctor* now, me still a bum—but he wasn't no doctor. Got yourself a double, Dr. Vollman?" Royce wagged the finger. "Yeah, you *do*."

As Royce skulked off to a tent or a spot under a boxcar, Keller made quick work of rounding up his instruments and supplies. He was dead-tired, but he'd move on anyway, because he didn't need that bastard sidling up later, sticking that grubby paw back out for a little blackmail that he couldn't pay.

In the east, the horizon was dark red with dust like dried blood. Keller was reaching to unlock the utility box, to put his medical bag away, when Marta, a flowing shadow among shadows, appeared on the opposite side of the truck bed. "You'll come with me now? We can offer you soup."

Keller nodded, and unlocked the cab instead of the box, reaching across to let Marta in beside him. As the engine grumbled to life, a few of the siding gypsies waved. When he let their "Dr. Vollman" wave back, Keller felt a mix of fear and shame. Headlights glaring bright against the small campfires, he continued up the crumbling service road.

Marta kept her own counsel. She watched the dangerous road they were traveling with calm patience, a serenity that gave her a kind of beauty that transcended her wrinkled skin. They climbed a long way above the siding camp. Then, as Keller rounded a corner in the almost


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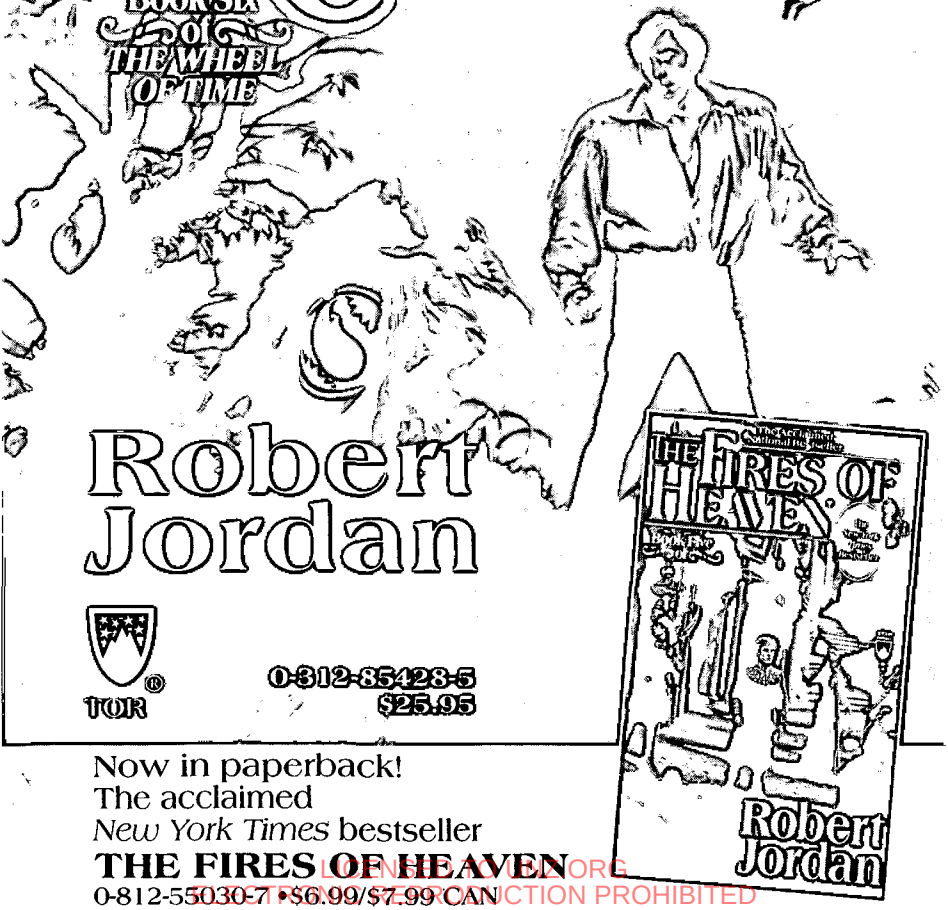

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non-existent road and came over a rise, their rear wheels sank deep in the soft dirt, spinning furiously, and they came to a shuddering stop. Keller exploded into a storm of cursing. Marta finally interrupted the goddammittohells he was throwing at the hung-up rear axle. "In the morning I will dig you out myself, if need be," she told him, slipping out of the truck and waving him toward the abandoned boxcar parked forever at the end of the spur.

A fire and a lantern. Jenny, enormously pregnant, managed to rise as they approached. She took his arm, smiled up at him. "Yeah, I'm Jenny." She followed his eyes down to her intimidating belly. "Deuce said you were coming." Marta climbed up into the boxcar and disappeared. "Awfully good of you, but I'm not due for three weeks, so you won't have to deliver any babies tonight." She gazed at the old nylon gym bag where Keller kept his instruments and supplies, then she caught Keller staring wistfully at the boiling pot.

The boy, Deuce, lunged around the boxcar as Marta slid down from the wide door with bread and several plastic bowls. Deuce gave Keller a casual wave, as if they'd always been crewmates together in the Space Armada. He began to dip soup from the blackened pot. In the yellow glow from the small solar lantern, Jenny didn't look much over eighteen. Her green eyes sparkled in a plain, freckled face, already weathered a little, and she grinned self-consciously, brushing back dark hair, as Deuce handed Keller his soup.

They all ate quietly near the fire, drawn close by night's first chill. There was nothing tense about the silence, but Keller felt compelled to interrupt it. "After dinner, I'll get out my stethoscope."

"Great. Marta says it's going to be a girl." Jenny rested her hand on her belly.

He nodded his head slowly, savoring the soup, much better than the watery and stringy lumps of root that he'd expected. Memory swelled and broke—Mom's voice and the clatter of pans. "Chicken noodle," he said. "I swear this tastes like Campbell's chicken noodle soup. When I was a kid, I got it when I was sick. You can't even *buy* it anymore." He heard the roughness in his voice as he wondered what Mom would think of him now.

"Don't know about that Campbell's stuff." Deuce scooted over to sit closer beside him, blue eyes glinting like cut gems in the firelight. "But they're pretty fine cattails. They're from Mr. Sartorius's garden."

Keller got lost in the faraway look filling Jenny's face. "Not chicken noodle, though. . . . " She shook her head and smiled at Deuce. "Tell Mr. Sartorius thanks, okay?"

Deuce nodded, and wiped his bowl clean with a piece of bread. He


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scrambled to his feet. "Gonna go see him, so I'll tell him right now, before I forget."

"Not for too long, okay?" urged Marta, retreating once again into the boxcar. Light reflected from Deuce's hair as he vanished into the darkness, nodding.

"Mr. Sartorius?" Keller wiped his own bowl clean, stacked it with Deuce's. "A local?"

"No." Jenny hesitated, eyes on Keller's face. "Marta's the only 'local.' Mr. Sartorius is kind of . . . not real. Sort of made-up, if you get me. An imaginary friend. But I'm not sure Deuce knows that . . . Don't mind him." She frowned as she took the pot away from the embers of the fire.

"Don't mind Sartorius or Deuce?" Keller asked, grinning.

"Either one." Jenny relaxed. "I found Deuce almost a year ago, when we were stuck on a siding. He was on his own . . . scrounging like a lost dog." The lantern streaked her freckled skin with shadow as she put her bowl away. "He's always going off into his own world."

But there's more to that glimmer in the boy's eyes, Keller wanted to say, more to that wild, fey glimmer. Maybe that's why *I've* never stuck anywhere, never clicked with anything or anybody, why *I* can play this fantasy-game of being a doctor. "He seems like a nice kid. Here." Keller opened the gym bag and pulled out the stethoscope. "You can listen to your baby's heart, and then I'll check your blood pressure and your urine, see if you're doing as good as you look."

She laughed. "I want to hear that kid's heart beating. That'd be so neat."

Keller found it, low down, as if the kid had dropped already, to hell with three weeks left. A sadness lurked at the corners of Jenny's eyes. Bad time and place to have a baby, and Keller saw that she was smart enough to know it. He nodded his head and put the bp cuff and urinary test strips back into his bag. She was spilling a little protein into her urine; not surprising considering that tonight's dinner was probably a better-than-average meal.

The solar lamp began to die. "Marta and I sleep in the car. Deuce likes it out here. He cleared you a smooth spot over there. Picked up all the rocks."

Keller nodded again as she worked herself to her feet and made her way over to the boxcar door, bowls in hand. He was quick to give her a boost up, but she waved him away. "Had practice," she murmured. "Need a blanket?"

"My sleeping bag's in the truck." He still made a step for her out of interlaced fingers. Her dusty foot was warm.

He said good night and fetched the precious sleeping bag from the utility box. His legs felt heavy as old tree trunks, but his head buzzed



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with wakefulness. Next to the boxcar, he put down his small tarp and the bag, went over and shut off the dimming lantern. Taking off nothing more than his boots and shirt—the night was already cool and would grow cold before morning—he tucked himself in. Overhead, stars spilled across the sky like crushed ice. In the east were Vega, Deneb, Altair. He'd found a book on astronomy in the prison library, with a star chart that he'd memorized, imagining and imagining. Now he wanted that chart, yearned for it with regret that bordered on grief.

Finally, Keller unzipped his bag, got out of it, and tossed it aside, folding it over to discourage small intruders. He would hit the road in the morning, be out of here before that Royce could make trouble. Pulling on his boots and shirt, Keller gave in to the tug of the stars, following the curve of the terrain, bushwhacking up the side of a hill. Higher.

The slim crescent of an old moon didn't provide much light, but near the summit, a small fire winked like a sleepy red eye. Wind pushed against him, shoving at him like he was tumbleweed. He'd let it shove him along these two years since old Doc Vollman died. It was easier to go with the wind. Doc had fought it and Doc had lost.

Keller stopped, squinting into the darkness. Ahead, just below the hill's summit and the starry sky, a door frame rose. Last memory of a ruined house? Keller walked closer. No sign of foundation or wall, just the boards of the frame, sunk like fenceposts into the dust. As he touched the dry, splintery door, it swung away from his hand.

"Yo, Doc!" Deuce bounded through, lifted a hand.

"Hi, Deuce." Keller stepped back, startled because he should have seen the kid coming.

"Mr. Sartorius says hi." Deuce straightened as tall as he could, proud with a secret, then smiled. "He says I can bring you to visit, but he thinks you won't come. I said you will so, and he says, sure, it could happen because *anything* can, and anyway, you have a kid's eyes, even if you don't see too good with 'em."

A kid's eyes? Felt like a compliment, although, after his climb up the hill, Keller didn't feel much like a kid; his legs ached. "So tell me about Mr. Sartorius."

"Just come *on*." Deuce swung from the doorjamb, untying his tattered shirt from around his waist and slipping it on while he glanced over at the dying fire. "He lives in a garden—biggest garden I ever saw, bigger 'n' the whole world. The grass turns into butterflies sometimes, or birds turn into a stream. Sometimes *I* turn into a tree!" Deuce's eyes gleamed brighter than the pale moon. "What I like best is being a rock. Things are real slow, and stuff doesn't matter, not today-stuff, like being hungry or worrying about getting punched out if I go down to the big camp for water. I can think for a long, long time—all deep and slow and careful.


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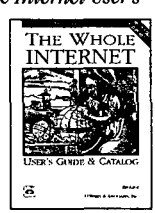


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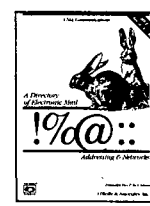


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They don't hurt, the rocks don't, even when they crack. I'd be one all the time if it wasn't for Jenny. I'd miss her."

The breeze touched Keller's neck with a cold finger. "Come on," Deuce urged him, shivering and gazing a little longingly at the small fire. He reached for Keller's hand. The touch felt like a benediction. The boy's fingers were damp and cold as ice. Full of a bittersweet respect for the boy, Keller played along. He pushed the door open and they stepped through.

And they stumbled, falling to their knees in lush green grass.

Thunderheads puffed on the horizon, snowy against a sky mauve with dawn. A placid brook wound across grassy veldt, and a flock of white pelicans lifted as Keller watched. A stem of scarlet lilies near his feet gave off the scents of remembrance, the roses of infatuation, the irises of recollection, all at once. On a rock, a neon-pink and white flamingo preened itself. And, easing closer, an enormous rhinoceros looked down its horned snout at Keller and idly flapped one ear.

"I see Thaddeus coerced you into visiting," it blew softly through its drooping lips. "Scratch, please."

Keller shook his head, squeezed his eyes tightly shut, sprang them open, blinked again, wondering if he was dead.

"Is death always the first thing you think about when you meet something new? Narrow." The rhino tossed its head so that light ran down its sleek horn. "Scratch, please." Deuce hastened off toward the water's shore. "Don't make yourself too scarce, Thaddeus," the rhino called out.

Numbly, Keller took a step closer and began to scratch the rhinoceros. What else do you do when you meet a talking rhino who isn't there? The wrinkled brown hide looked scaly and tough, felt like velvet beneath his fingers.

"Yeees, just above my shoulder . . . higher . . . *yes*."

"Then I'm dreaming . . . yeah, I fell asleep next to Deuce's fire. . . ."

"I am not a *dream*." The rhino's snort made Keller jump. "If you don't think that you're dead, then you turn things into *dreams*. Limits." He clucked his thick tongue. "Now, what could I do to spare you the trouble of wondering whether you're insane? Might I point out that you have to grasp the joke? . . . which, of course, is that the limits are of your own imposing." Several buzzing flies transformed into black and white birds and fluttered onto the rhino's back. "Thaddeus is just beginning to comprehend this." The birds began to pick other black flies from the rhino's back and eat them, until the flies became the birds which ate the other flies, previously birds, black and white, forever . . . "I think," the rhino deliquesced, "that the boy was wrong. You're entirely predictable. Now, if you'll excuse me. . . ."

"Mr. Sartorius?" Keller asked, and a part of him winced.



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"Talk to me when you've made up your minds." The rhino ambled away, biting off the stems of lilies. Chewing slowly, he farted a cloud of pink birds. They settled into the grass and turned immediately into small pink flowers. Sartorius turned his huge head. "You might prescribe me something for that." With a chuckle, he lumbered on.

Rather than dare following, Keller joined Deuce at the brook. He sat on the real-feeling ground and brushed his hand through the grass, still damp with warm dawn. It was all too much. In a rush of fearful anger, Keller grabbed a handful of grass and tore it from the ground. It turned into a chocolate cupcake in his hand.

A Hostess cupcake! Keller stared at the shiny chocolate frosting, the tidy swirls of white icing decorating its diameter. White filling leaked from the bottom. He squeezed the cake gently and it crumbled in his hand, fresh, moist against his lips, and he tasted chocolate. He hadn't seen these things since he'd been little. Taking another cautious taste, half expecting to wake up with his mouth full of dust or dead leaves, he held his sticky hand up, called out, "Deuce, it's a cupcake, a goddamn cupcake! Come here!"

Deuce charged over and stood before Keller with his shirttails drenched. "The water," he almost whispered, "It's so cold and clean and *good*. C'mon, Doc!" The boy reached with both arms to pull him up out of the grass.

That name, Doc, scalded Keller as he staggered along, through grass and over a tumble of boulders that gave them a dozen wonderful places to sprawl flat and splash in the water shimmering with morning. Keller gobbled his cupcake, gulped a handful of water, reached for a reed and visualized a cupcake, hoping for even more.

Nothing but a reed. As he tossed it away in disgust, it dissolved into a golden spangle of confetti.

So much for figuring out the rules. The sun was warm and he spread his arms wide, glancing away from Deuce's approval, watching the clouds drift across the sky. Slowly he became aware that he was looking at the sky from . . . all over. That he could see the clouds from all sides at once, that he was looking up through the branches of trees, at the bottom sides of flowers, and at a fuzzy caterpillar crawling up the stem of a lily, already unfurling new scarlet. The wind rippled across him, stirring him gently, and he tasted rain, sweet with wind and melted ice, piquant with dust from some distant desert. . . .

Wait a minute. . . .

Something . . . there was something else . . . and he sat up, became a contraction of meaty fibers that squeezed blood through tiny tubes and levered calcinareous columns of cells. Keller pushed his hand through leaves and against tickling blades of grass as he rose. "I was *grass*," he



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said aloud, marveling at how subtly the tissues of his throat vibrated. I was a field, I was earth dreaming of weather and slowly turning . . .

He was nowhere near the brook now. The sky was hazy with autumn, and a golden maple leaf drifted down, settling gently on his shoulder as he followed it with his eyes. How much time had passed? My God, what about Jenny? Was she long gone with the other gypsies, or was she perhaps long dead, buried somewhere in the dust near the siding? He swallowed bitterness as sunlight glittered silvery-blue on a wide river, languid and sleepy looking, where a flock of white geese tipped with black soared in from the north to land, splashing and honking.

Amazed, letting go of his regret, he strode toward the river, at one and the same time a little chilly and thankful for the blood and bone and skin that brought him this feeling that was so new and wonderful after his long season as earth and rock . . . chilly.

And who was that by the river, sitting on a stump, his head bowed, while a rhinoceros foraged nearby?

Keller doubled his pace, suddenly broke into a run. "Doc? Doc Vollman!" he cried out. As Keller lunged past, Sartorius raised his head and mimicked, " 'Doc Vollman!' Egad, now we've got two of them!" His rhino lips flapping, Sartorius still managed to sneer. Keller ignored the sarcasm and slapped the old man hard on his back. Coming to a halt, he rested his hands on Doc Vollman's shoulders. He looked into the bleary brown eyes, took note of the old skin, both withered and puffy. Vollman was somewhere between sobriety and stupor, the place where Doc liked best to be. Dressed in the same threadbare three-piece suit they'd buried him in, he looked incongruous but contented.

Vollman handed him a tin cup. "You made me spill. Get me a drink." With a gnarled—but steady—finger, Doc pointed toward the glittering river.

Grinning, obliging, Keller trundled down to the shore. Over his shoulder he said, "I finally figured it out, Sartorius. You're a manifestation of the Godhead!"

Doc Vollman and the rhino both made rude noises as Keller returned. Sartorius grimaced and said, "You make me sound like an attendant in the Divine Bathroom. Give it up. You're beginning to bore me."

Taking a drink first, Keller handed Doc's cup back. Spitting and choking, all he heard was laughter.

"Grain alcohol, son," Vollman cackled. "Easier to drink than to run. And you're still a'runnin', aren't you? I knew you were running when I hired you on as an assistant. But we're all running from something, son. That's all life is—one long race from the darkness at birth, back into the same bloody darkness. Pretty damn futile, if you ask me. But don't mind me, Keller. *I'm* not running anymore." He quaffed the cup of



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190 proof. "Not anymore. But did I ever ask you what you were running *from*? Don't believe I did." Vollman chuckled, wiping his mouth on his jacket sleeve.

"I see," pontificated Sartorius as he approached, "that both of you are fond of avoiding matters at hand after you've gone out of your way to invent them. It's my understanding that a baby needs to be delivered. Would the real Dr. Vollman please step forward?"

Doc kept cackling. "It's not going to be an easy one, son. The planet's tired of us and we know it. The Drought is killing us all. We're ready to quit. That little'un's ready to quit before it even gets *started.*" He eyed Sartorius and restrained himself for a moment, then resumed, "You shit on a planet for four thousand years and now *you* got to drink it. Not me! I'll *pick* my poison, thank you!" He held his tin cup back out to Keller.

"Doc," Keller murmured, full of hurt, "I'm sorry I stole your name, but—"

"You didn't steal it, son. I *willed* it to you, *Keller!*" He laughed so hard that he was choking.

Shifting his weight from foot to foot—and from foot to foot—Sartorius let his expression make it clear he was fed up with both of them. Keller stepped away from Doc Vollman, feeling a kind of doom he'd never experienced before, closing his eyes, wanting to wake up, wanting Sartorius to assure him again that he wasn't dead like Doc, and wanting, yes, to *run.*

His feet were already carrying him away from the river when he opened his eyes.

Deuce collided with him, grabbing an arm. "Doc," he was almost crying, "Jenny, her baby, it's coming! You gotta come back, quick."

Old Doc Vollman staggered toward the river hollering, "It might not taste all that good, but it's sterile!" And Sartorius merely looked on, eyes suddenly full of earnest concern for them all.

"Where do we get out of here, Deuce? Where?" The boy was still tugging his arm fiercely as they ran.

And suddenly they were staggering down the hill, the frame behind them, its weathered door swinging in the cold night wind.

Deuce's silence was broken by nothing but his hard breathing as he charged ahead. Keller barely kept up. The wind carried the sound—a low, stifled moan. Coming to the boxcar, he leaped in ahead of the boy.

Two solar lanterns, the dim one from the campsite, a brighter one that had been kept in reserve, illuminated Marta cradling Jenny, wrapped in a tattered quilt. Another lay rumpled beneath her raised knees.

"My water broke." Jenny poked at the sodden quilt. "This doesn't feel right. Shouldn't it feel . . . *right?*"

Keller stroked her face, brushing the light sweat from her forehead.



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Her fear shadowed her eyes and made her look younger than she was. He shared all that fear, but tried to hide it within himself, to make his words soft, "There isn't any right or wrong." I'm not God, he wanted to yell, I'm not even a real fucking *doctor!* But instead he asked gently, "Have any idea how fast the contractions are coming? Tried to time them?"

"Sometimes they come close together, and then they don't happen for a long time." Her face tightened suddenly. From the tension in her muscles and the grimace on her face, it looked like a bad one. Maybe this *would* be a fast birth, Keller assured himself. He'd assisted Doc in a few caesareans, back in the tiny clinic. But not too many normal births. Women out here mostly had their kids at home.

"Jenny?" Deuce pushed near Keller. "You okay?"

"Okay." She nodded, reached for his hand. "It hurts, having a kid. That's all. You can't get around it."

"You're sure? You're really sure?"

He was terrified. *I'd be a rock all the time if it wasn't for Jenny. . . .* Keller looked away from the frightened hunch of Deuce's shoulders. The kid had *already* lost a family someplace. "Relax." He touched Deuce's shoulder and felt the boy's muscles leap beneath his fingers. "She'll be all right," he said.

"Promise?" Deuce's blue eyes burned with a demand for the truth.

"Sure . . . I promise." It came out on its own, instantly too late to qualify. Keller looked away from those wild, fey eyes, caught Marta gazing at him from the shadows where she still cradled Jenny. "I'd better take over here." He slipped a hand in his pocket and withdrew his keys, held them out to her in an act of trust that amazed Keller himself. "In the utility box, my bag. Can you get it, please?" As he shifted Jenny into his own arms, he saw that she'd begun to bleed. Dear God, he muttered inwardly, easing her to the floor of the boxcar as Marta fled. In the angular light of the lanterns, he watched the bright blood staining the quilt and streaking the white curve of Jenny's thigh. Too much and way too soon, and what was he going to do about it? He'd learned all that Doc had to teach him in three years, but that wasn't everything, and they'd done so few births, caesareans in the clean white surgery behind the exam room. He caught Deuce's forlorn stare. "I need water . . . do you have to go all the way to the camp, or could Mr. Sartorius . . . " Keller couldn't bring himself to actually ask.

"There's a pump up the hill, a real old hand pump. It's Marta's secret, part of why she stays here. She says there's still enough rain in the winter to fill the aqu . . . the . . . "

"Aquifer," Keller said softly, respecting a magic suddenly on par with



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Mr. Sartorius's garden. "A bucketful of water, okay? At least one for now."

"I shouldn't of said anything. She might—"

Marta hiked herself into the boxcar. "Go quick. And when you get back, build a fire for us to boil it."

Deuce was gone and Keller smiled narrowly. The water didn't need to be boiled, but Marta was afraid, too, and it would get that much fear out of here at least. Jenny was clutching his hand as he opened his bag. Her face was pale. "Let go," he said, and he gently wrapped the blood-pressure cuff around her upper arm. Her pressure wasn't bad—low, but it always was in late pregnancy. She didn't look shocky, either. He palpated her swollen belly, frowning because the kid was too high in the uterus, trying to think what it meant. Holding his breath, he slid the stethoscope along the hard curve of her belly. Heartbeat. He consolingly put the earpieces into her ears. "She's fine."

"I wasn't in love with him, you know." Jenny tilted her head, surely listening to the syncopation of the fetal heartbeat with her own. "He was just sweet and warm, and I guess we were both lonely. He went east because he heard there were jobs there. I didn't know . . . I was pregnant yet." She took the stethoscope off and handed it back to him. "I didn't mean this to happen. I know there's things you can do, things you can even . . . wear. But where d'you *get* them, where . . . out *here?* I didn't mean for this to happen . . . but I don't want her to die. I really don't."

Keller seized her hand as another contraction gripped her. It wasn't the kid he was worried about. She closed her eyes and curved her body around the contraction, not fighting it, breathing carefully.

If I'm going to play God, I'd better deliver. Doc had never told him that, maybe *would* have if he hadn't tumbled down the stairs with a dying heart that night two years ago. There were a lot of things he could've told Keller if they'd had more time together. Like what the hell to *do* now. Jenny groaned, straining. Blood welled between her thighs, thick and savagely crimson in the yellow light. A lot of blood.

"Wait, don't push yet. Pant, okay? Jenny?" He stroked her sweaty face, leaning close until her eyes focused on him. "Don't push till I tell you, okay? I'm going to check inside, see what's going on? All right?"

On the far side of a wall of pain, she nodded stiffly.

Keller opened one of his few remaining packs of sterile gloves, snapped them on. Jenny made a soft sound of protest as he eased his hand between her legs. What starts in pleasure ends in pain, but what a hell of a beginning for the kid, he thought, searching with his hand for the hard roundness of an infant head. Cervix was completely dilated, so where the hell was the *head?*

Softness. No foot. No head.


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Keller pulled his hand out, feeling cold in the pit of his belly. *Placenta previa.* He stripped off the bloody glove, remembering the photos in one of the books Doc Vollman had made him read. The placenta had grown across the cervix, and now the baby had to push past it. But the pressure was tearing it loose too soon, making it bleed. Keller looked into his nylon bag. Nothing for her in there. Nothing that would help out here in the dust.

There was only one real choice. "Push!" he groaned, with a hurt that might have been Jenny's own. He seized her by the shoulders, digging in his fingers, ignoring Marta's twitch of outrage. "Jenny, push *hard.* Please? You've got to have this baby as fast as you can."

Some of the glazed distance faded from her eyes. All right, those eyes said, and she caught her breath as the next contraction shook her. Her freckles stood out like flecks of gold on her pale, sweaty skin as her face twisted with effort. Blood, so much and so bright, squeezed out. Blood pressure seventy over fifty-five. Too low.

Keller opened his mouth to send Marta out to the truck again, then realized she wouldn't understand what he needed. "Watch her. I'll be right back," he said, urging Marta to take his place as he scrambled for the door and sprang from the boxcar. Ramming his hand into his pocket, he called out to Marta, "My keys?"

"It's unlocked," she answered calmly. "I didn't want to have to mess with it again."

Cursing, Keller ran across the small campsite. As he approached his truck, he heard an engine in the distance. Soon, over the rise, came a police rig, a high-centered four-wheeler, purring like a mountain lion and ready to take the broken roads and hills.

Keller froze, listening to the engine's grumble; a sheriff got out of the four-wheeler, young and sleepy, his angular features dark, full of wary curiosity. "You're the doctor? Vollman's your name?"

"Yeah," Keller gambled. "Delivering a baby. Want to give me a hand?" Keller grabbed one of his few bags of normal saline from the utility box.

"You're the doctor." This time it wasn't quite a question. "Had a funny report this evening. Scum from the siding camp came into town and said you were part of a prison bust five or six years ago, said your name's Michael Keller. There'd be a reward. For him and for me. Not much, but enough to make it worth checking National. The database said Keller was killed about a year and a half ago while they were trying to apprehend him in Idaho. I made a call. Talked to the deputy that killed Michael Keller. Said he ID'd Keller himself. Said a Dr. Vollman saved his little girl's life. Aren't many hospitals up there in Idaho anymore. Described you to a tee." He paused for a long moment, staring hard at Keller. "Tell


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you what, Doctor Vollman, I'll come back in the morning, and you'd better have a mom and a kid waiting for me, or you're in deep shit."

Keller saw the delicate balancing act in the young sheriff's eyes, the weighing of what was true and what made sense. "It's a deal," Keller said. Then, in the same breath, "Hey, Sheriff, you do me a favor? My truck's hung up. Think you could push 'er on over the top?"

"In the morning," was all the sheriff said. He got back into his rig, turned tight, and pulled away.

Briefly blinded by the headlights, Keller sensed movement as he ran back across the camp. His vision cleared, and he saw nothing more than a pail of water and an unlit fire freshly laid in the pit. How much had Deuce seen or heard? Keller worried for only a second before Jenny's cries were launching him back into the boxcar, telling him he had three lives to save, one of them his own.

He hung the IV bag from a rusted hook in the wall, and slid the needle into Jenny's arm and taped the tubing down. "Try to remember not to pull this out, okay?"

" 'Kay." Her voice had gotten fainter, more distant.

Keller shifted the one lantern that still glowed, peeled back her eyelid, winced at the pale membranes. Pulse 120 between contractions. Well, she wasn't dying yet. *Yet.* "Push!" he yelled. "She's almost here."

A lie that might become truth in a moment, but he didn't dare check her again. If he ruptured a vein in that soft mass of placenta, she'd die in minutes. "C'*mon!*"

"I see the head!" Marta cried.

More than a head—the newborn tumbled out in a rush, wet and streaked with her mother's blood. She choked once as Marta wiped her face with a dry corner of the saturated quilt, then gasped and cried in a thin mewling that meant life.

Keller trusted the infant to Marta. The umbilical cord, rigid and full of blood, was softening. He clamped it quickly and cut. "I'm sorry, Jenny," he said, and bore down hard on her slack belly.

She cried out at the unexpected pain, doubled around the sudden contraction. Another gush of blood drenched the quilt. No placenta.

Think, dammit, *think,* Keller kept cursing himself. *The planet's tired of us and we know it,* Vollman taunted within his head. *We're ready to quit.* "No!" Keller whispered, filling a syringe with pitocin. It would make the uterus contract, maybe strip that damned bleeding placenta off the uteral wall. There wasn't anything else he could do. "Jenny? Jenny, it *is* a girl." He leaned close as he gave her the injection. Her membranes too pale, pulse thin and dropping, and he could tell himself it was because the worst of labor was over, but she was still bleeding through that placenta . . . bleeding to death.



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Marta crowded him, the squirming infant wrapped in something miraculously white. "Hold your daughter," she murmured, supporting Jenny's arms along with the baby. "What will you name her?"

"She's beautiful." Words so faint that Keller hardly heard them. Her eyelids ticked and her skin felt clammy with shock. Keller instinctively rolled up the bloodstained quilt and tucked it back beneath her legs, covered her as well as he could with the tattered one. The baby was sucking weakly, but she was nursing. She probably wouldn't survive if Jenny died, though.

"You did just fine," he lied. It didn't matter anymore. And she shouldn't be afraid. "You're just fine, both of you."

A shadow darkened her eyes, then she smiled and reached for his hand. "It's all right."

Such compassion. Because she *knew* he was lying? As if she was forgiving him.

Deuce had clambered into the boxcar. Keller felt the boy standing behind him where he knelt, sensed the boy's trembling legs, tight fists, and fast breathing, as if he'd been running.

And what does he see, Keller asked himself with dread, except for all this blood? Deuce muttered, "No," in a thin wail almost as startled as the newborn's. "*No* . . . you're gonna *kill* her! You're a fake. *Fake!* You promised, you're gonna . . . " With blinding speed, he seized Keller's bag and fled from the boxcar, vaulting into the darkness.

Full of panic confusing itself with fear and fury, Keller took out after the boy, bolting across the camp and straight up the hill. Keller felt held back by the lack of sleep and the tension, by the stiffness of night's last and deepest cold before dawn broke. Early summer, but late autumn stars pierced the sky because of the hour.

His lead widening, Deuce had drawn a bead on the doorway and hurled himself through it. Sure he'd never find the boy now, Keller followed.

Sartorius's garden hit him with all the surprise of the baby's cry, with all the pain of Deuce's. "I *know* this world." It came to Keller suddenly and then more gently. The landscape was now dressed in the northern pines of his early childhood. He'd walked in this land before, years ago, had found the doorway in the shadow of these trees. This world of secrets both mute and mutable had briefly been one with the world of schools and dull teachers and yelling parents. But like a fork in the path, the worlds had diverged. And Keller had stumbled down the fork that led to dust and prison and deceit, and he'd traveled so long without looking back that he'd forgotten that there was anything to look back *toward* and remember.

Spring and sun, the last melting snow, and a scent as heady as birth


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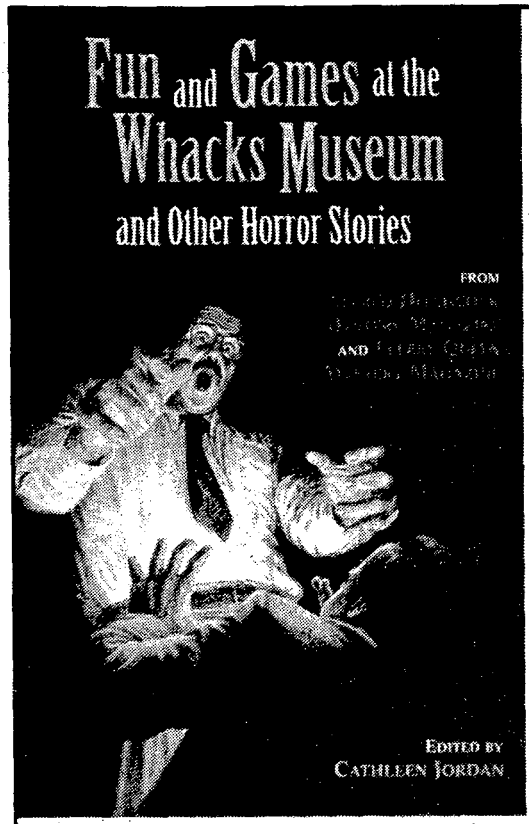


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and blood, but a scent so certain . . . Keller halted, gulping the air, cool and fresh.

"You still don't understand." Mr. Sartorius sidled up. Ice rimed the tip of his horn, and a keg of tiny elk sported across his broad back, crashing into one another so that their antlers clicked and clacked. Sartorius lowered his head, though apparently not to forage. "I can help you find the boy, but what what will happen once I do?"

"I need that bag. It has all my—"

"But you keep insisting on the fact that *you're not a doctor*. You *could* be *sort* of a doctor, just like you could *sort of* understand, but you can't can't can't, because you insist on *trying* so hard."

"It's not that simple."

"So you make it simpler by lying."

"And it's not *that* simple, either! Why are you so *pompous*? You live in such an amazing place!" Keller could see to the edge of the woods and began to walk in that direction.

Sartorius crashed along beside him, his elk still clacking. "You stole the words right out of my mouth, Mr. Michael Keller Vollman, or whoever you are. Fine. You'll get your bag, but I don't think you're going to see Thaddeus again. He's quite occupied . . . being a rock. You've frightened him with your *lies*."

As Keller moved toward the border of the woods, he knew it himself, the urge to *become* the earth beneath him, humming softly with the voice of rock and worms and hot flowing stone. The ground was warm beneath the snow, just like Jenny was warm. Or just like she *had* been warm. Loss made him twitch, kept him from sinking into the humming earth and being a stone. And now Sartorius trundled off in another direction. Over his hulking shoulder he said "May I remind you . . . limits. Limits and lies . . . " He began to shuffle in an absurdly awkward schottische in time to his words, "If you want wonder, but only the way that you *want* it, then you'd better wonder whether you really want wonder at all!" And he became an amazing pattern of shadowy bark and dazzling sunbeams.

Stepping into the meadow and the warming sun, Keller murmured aloud, "I want to go back."

"Silly word, 'back.' Silly word!" hooted Doc Vollman perched on a high stump, sucking on a canteen and cradling the precious bag in his lap.

"Shut up!" Keller said, storming toward Doc.

"The boy wanted me to take a look at his friend. Said you've botched it bad and she's bleeding to death. Had to explain that there wasn't much I could do, that I'm sort of *stuck* here."

Keller froze, colder than the high desert night, much colder than this melting snow. "Doc . . . " he whispered, "I thought this was heaven, but it's not, is it? It's . . . "


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"Oh go ahead and get it out of your system, son, and *say* it: Hell. And it's sure as hell *not* Hell. Not the way *I* see it. And I *don't* see it quite like you. And the boy doesn't see it like either one of us." He took a swig from his canteen. "I drink and you run—it's 'cause we both friggin' care! Now, *are* you a doctor or *aren't* you? *Can* you tell that boy the truth? *Can* you help his friend live? And more to the point, if you have to, *can* you help her die?"

Keller's hand folded over the top of the bag. "I know you," he said, silken shivers of memory brushing his skin. Not *thought* memory. Not words. Recollection came in the brush of the breeze on his skin, the sun in its now unfamiliar—and unforgettable—blue sky.

He smiled, warmth rising up from some deep forgotten well inside him. "We had fun," he said. Doc Vollman was gone and Mr. Sartorius rolled one china-blue eye in Keller's direction. "The past tense is another way to squash your world." He sounded sad.

"We can come and go, can't we?" Keller raised his head high.

"*You* say come and go." Sartorius snorted explosively.

"Where's the doorway?" Keller asked.

Mr. Sartorius wagged his tail so that it slapped his butt. "That is *your* word. It has no meaning here. Why don't you just make up your *minds*."

Keller turned his back on Sartorius, and, with the bag, broke into a jog, wanting to flee the slow dreaming of the rocks. Okay, I don't know anything, Keller told himself, except that I've got to find that door frame. Panting, sidestitched, skidding in the snow, he staggered into a winding stream. There *had* to be a door. And the stream narrowed, leading him into the pine shadows of his childhood. He splashed water so high that it landed on his lips, hot with exertion. No, it wasn't grain alcohol, but water pure and sweet and cold, and he tumbled onto the shore, hunched over and drank, his hands cupped, knowing that it was time . . . to go home.

The feelings were rolled up into a wordless ball, a twinge that cut through his fatigue and hunger to remind him that he wasn't through . . . playing.

Keller blinked. The grass had gone dry. The early morning sun hardened. And where was the doorway? he asked himself, searching the face of the hill for it as he started toward the boxcar. Farther up the hill, and sure, it should be right *there*. But it wasn't. As he came around the face of the hill, he saw that the sheriff had returned, his rig next to Keller's. He waited sleepily, sullenly, between the two vehicles.

"Jenny," Keller moaned, remembering her pain. He could run, but without his pack, without water and something to eat, he couldn't get far, not far enough. Besides, there was Deuce, being a rock, or lost somewhere up on that hill. "Damn," Keller said, gripping the bag's handle



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until his hand stung like his tired eyes. Then it seized him like it never had before, the hurting and the dying. Because he remembered what it was to play and to go home, everything hurt, and he had no words for the sheriff as he approached him.

They both glanced at Marta, who sauntered over from the small fire she'd been tending. Her face was stern and as unrested as the sheriff's and probably his own. But within it was a light. "Doctor, you see?"

Keller looked around and shrugged.

"The sheriff pushed your truck so that . . . I don't have to dig you out." She smiled a little smugly. "Jenny passed the afterbirth right after you left. She still bleeds, but only a little. I guess you did the right thing, Doc."

*Doc.* It felt right this time. *I drink and you run,* Doc Vollman had said. "I shouldn't have taken off," Keller said to Marta. He lowered his head. "I'm sorry."

"Say it to her if you got to." Marta sniffed. "Whatever, you did okay." She nodded toward the bloody cloth-wrapped bundle and a kettle near the fire. "It is hard to find the water to wash such a thing. Hard times, but Jenny and her baby will live. They must eat, though." She eyed the kettle again. As she returned to it, she called back, "I gave the sheriff your keys so that he could push your truck."

"Looks like you saved another one, Doc," the Sheriff said, tugging Keller's keys from his pocket and returning them. "If you wanted to come to town awhile, there'd be call for you." And he let it go, like that, shrugging Keller's own shrug before he dragged himself up into his rig and drove away.

Low morning sun stained one end of the boxcar with the colors of rust and blood. When Keller pulled himself up through the door, the darkness soothed his eyes. He stumbled to a halt. "Jenny?" She lay curled around her tiny daughter, nursing her. Keller went to work. Blood pressure low but reasonable. Pulse rate better. She wasn't in shock and she wasn't dying. Marta was right. The bleeding had stopped once the placenta had separated.

Jenny gave him a feeble smile as he closed his bag back up. "I'm glad you were here, Doctor Vollman."

"Name's Keller," he whispered. "And the little girl . . . what's her name?"

Jenny nodded, unsurprised. She'd heard Deuce. Maybe she'd somehow sensed Keller's own fear and confusion. "Rebecca and me are glad you were here, Doc."

He smiled, leaned close. "I've got to go chase down Deuce. Then we're going to look for a hospital. Just to make sure. Maybe Marta can help you round up what you need to take with you. Okay?"



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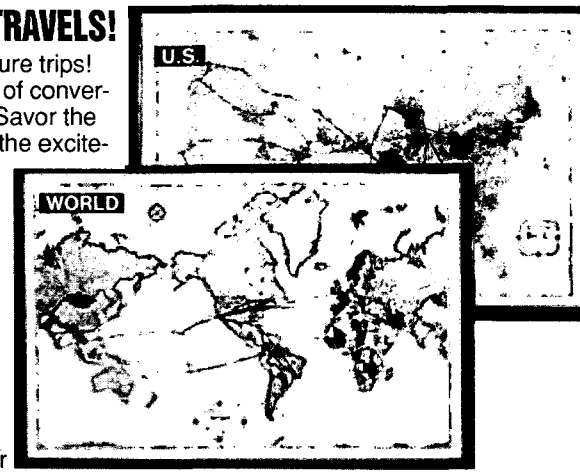


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"I don't know."

Keller realized that he'd *created* the wind that pushed him along, and then called it drifting. Maybe nobody really drifted. It was time for him to stop. "The sheriff says they might like to see me in town, even if I'm just . . . sort of a doc. But I've got to find somebody who can sell me the drugs and equipment I need. Or maybe we'll want to move on . . . lots of folks who need a little doctoring."

She touched his arm. "I'd like to come with you. That's what you're asking me, isn't it? I'll come along for a while, anyway, but Deuce's got to come, too."

He closed his hand over her fingers, aware of her warmth, the compassion behind her smile. "Yeah, got to find him first." He slipped his hand away from hers as he rose.

Leaping from the boxcar, he sidled over to Marta and asked her softly, "And do you want to come, too? You're welcome."

The morning light caught her dark and weathered face. "This is my home. I was here long before the gypsies started coming, you know, Doctor?"

He nodded. She was not one to argue with. There was power in her hand when she took his. "The desert has not dried me out, even though it grows and grows." She gazed up the hill. "The door, I sometimes go through it, too. But only sometimes. The boy, Thaddeus, the desert has given birth to him—maybe even more than his lost mother did. It is his nature to pass through it as he wishes. It is a big gift, Doctor. As big as Jenny and her baby. I hope to be here a long time—one day, he may return. Or you." She let go of Keller's hand. "I must go. The pump takes much work for just a little water."

"I'll bring you a couple of new quilts. I swear."

"That would be very kind of you, Doctor. Thank you." Marta made her way slowly toward a low rise and disappeared behind it.

This time, Keller took his time ascending the hill, appreciating the day before it was so bright that he needed his sunglasses, feeling the light sweat that beaded his forehead. We are so *wonderful,* he thought, feeling muscle, bone, and rushing blood as if for the first time.

As he approached, the breeze opened the splintering door. Stepping through, he said aloud, "I understand," and thought he heard a faint, derisive snort. Keller turned, and there it was, warped wood and an aimlessly placed frame. But he'd passed through the doorway and . . . he felt the wonder again. Yes! Jenny and the baby lived, but not because of any magic in Sartorius's world. They made it—he told himself proudly—because of luck and the magic that *I* worked in *this* world. But it took Sartorius and his garden, nearly lost, for me to see it.

Continuing up the hill, Keller listened to the wind, caught the squawk


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of a distant crow. "Deuce!" Keller called loudly. And then he looked at the ground, shambling, whispering, "Thaddeus . . . Deuce." Loneliness dwindled to nothing when the earth herself sighed into your ear. Abandonment, betrayal—they were such tiny things if your heart was rock. Keller closed his eyes, speaking to the stones, to the dreaming rock that jutted up through the dry soil. "Time to come home."

And it *is* time, Keller assured himself, to come home to *this* world of wonder . . . and of pain. "Okay, Sartorius," Keller called out. "No here, no there, no doors . . . but I *know* you, the way I knew your garden when I was a kid. Okay, I can't *walk* there anymore, so you *tell* him she's okay, tell him Jenny's fine, and the baby's fine, and we want to go away, but we won't go *without* him. You tell him that, okay?"

And there was a snort, and a huge and sharp horn cut the wind for only an instant, disappearing into the sun's glare. And balanced on the tip of the horn had been a small blue flower that came to rest on Keller's shirt. He lifted it and studied it without awe as he trudged toward the summit of the hill, ready to shout down the sun if he had to.

Deuce was huddled near a boulder at the top, his eyes fixed on the vast Dry, on the savage sun, on the storms of salt and dust that already bloodied and darkened the earth. He rose and walked hesitantly toward Keller, face still glazed with stone dreams. When he stumbled, Keller stepped quickly forward, arms going around him, wanting to cry suddenly, because all he saw was rock and sage . . . and a storm of sun-bleached hair spilling over eyes that saw *wonder*. "Let's go," Keller said in a thick voice. "Jenny's waiting for you."

Deuce met his eyes, rigid in his grasp for a moment, wary. Then his body relaxed and he leaned against Keller. "You were really *there* with Mr. Sartorius," he said. And then, "Jenny didn't die?"

"No, she didn't. And yeah, I was there. And you were right, about me being a fake. But I'm not anymore, y'think?"

Deuce, frowning, looked at him, and then his shoulders sagged. "I'm glad," he said, mustering a lot of strength. "I'm really glad."

"Me too." But Keller knew that a part of himself would always grieve, would always want to grasp like an adult. "Deuce, what does Mr. Sartorius look like?" And instantly he answered his own question. "No." He shook his head. "Never mind." Deuce would describe a rhinoceros, because that's what Keller saw, so that's what Keller would hear.

The wind poked him, sharp as a rhino's horn in his back, as they started down the hill. "We'll do okay," Keller said to Deuce. "Y'think?"

"I think," Deuce said.

From time to time, as they walked, a hint of wavering grass overlaid the dusty land, and clouds took the shape of geese flying high. ●


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Jamil Nasir recently sold two science fiction novels to Bantam/Spectra. His first novel—with the working title *Quasar*—will be out in mid-1995, and he is currently finishing up the second book. In his latest short story, Mr. Nasir shows us just how dangerous it is to tangle with...

# THE LORD OF SLEEP

## Jamil Nasir

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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In the middle of his shift Alex Stane's eyes started to close. A whirlpool of darkness opened at his feet and the dingy airport departure lounge roared around him.

He tore himself out of one of the hundred plastic chairs and lurched toward the men's bathroom, hoping no drug-runner stoolies or airport security people were watching. He banged into the doors of two occupied toilet stalls before he found an empty one, slumped onto the seat heavily, and snapped the lock with trembling fingers.

Somnophobia, they called it: aversion to sleep. It and the resulting psychoses were why they made sniffers retire after five years, to nice desk jobs where you could dodder away the rest of your career dreaming of the jolt, the high singing in your brain, the incredible waking—

Stane's trembling fingers drew spray disinfectant and the tiny, precious canister of rhinoneurotransmitter from his jacket pocket. The disinfectant stung the roof of his mouth as he doused his implanted catheter, then popped its outer cap with a fingernail. He opened his mouth wide enough for two dentists and snapped in the neurotransmitter canister, feeling the sinus pressure as it fired into his rhinencephalon. Then he snapped it back out and capped the catheter again.

At first there was nothing.

Then there was everything, the smell-images of all times and places superimposed blindingly.

That faded like a sunset and waking came, expanding in the way you never get used to, like a wide, rippleless lake glowing in the evening, opening up within and around him so that he seemed to sense the things going on beyond the walls, the abundant life outside the bathroom, in the airport, the vast evening beyond, all over the vast planet Earth.

The man he saw in the bathroom mirror coming out of the toilet stall was tall and thin, with large, bony hands, hair slicked back from craggy, stained features, feverish eyes.

That man strode down the airport concourse now with vigorous steps, carrying the empty briefcase that made him look like a business traveler. He would lose his job if airport security caught him falling asleep in the middle of his shift; that meant he wasn't getting his mandatory eight hours of sleep per day, which meant the somnophobia was getting to him, the rhinoneurotransmitter interfering with the buildup of gamma-amino butyric acid in his reticular activating system, where sleep came from. He was sure some of his coworkers suspected: everyone knew stories of sniffers faking their papers to keep going after the mandatory retirement period, which was the main safeguard against the somno. He didn't care what they thought as long as they left him alone. Alone to work in the clarity of the rhino, far from their murky, petrified world.



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The vast, worn smell of the terminal came to him now finely disaggregated, the cracked, greenish marble floor, the stuffy, echoing space up to the vaulted ceiling three stories above, half-dead plants in their tubs by the tall windows bluish now with dusk, candy and sour newsprint in the newsstand, rotten teeth and nicotine lungs of a janitor slowly sweeping cigarette butts, puffs of oily jet fuel smoke—

In all those smells something stood out. Something distant yet crystal clear, a cold, electric smell he had been trained to recognize a decade ago, wafting down the C concourse.

Stane waited in line for the metal detectors, then strode hungrily down the endless, jostling corridor roaring with voices, flight announcements, footsteps, fixing now on the frayed smell of a flight attendant on No-Doz, the high, ever-present buzz of coffee, the sour, flaming smell of alcohol, the bitter spoor of tranquilizers. But the electric snowflake smell got stronger, until he came to the crowded, breath-heavy air of Gate 12. In one of the rows of seats a small, tense man in a dark suit sat with a briefcase and overnight bag. The cocaine spoor fairly sparked around him.

If they could get you to shadow a suspect smeared with cocaine cologne strong enough to attract all the police-dogs and novice sniffers in the airport, the real smuggler would get away. Stane walked casually back to the concourse. This was what they paid him for, and why the airport security people closed their eyes to all the little signs that he was a non-sleeper: because he could distinguish smells a novice would confuse, and knew the drug-runners' tricks.

Sure enough, at Gate 19, boarding for Chicago, a fat housewife type stood in line for economy class with just a twinkle of snowflake scent around fat carry-ons under the heavy, orchid smell of her perfume.

Stane shouldered in among the businessmen at a long row of pay phones and called a number.

When it answered, he said: "Gate 19, female, five-six, brown, blue, one-ninety, red flower blouse and black stretch pants, two sky-blue bags," and hung up.

He didn't wait to see the plainclothes detectives come into the departure lounge. He had smelled something else, very faint.

Heroin, it said to him first, then opium. But it wasn't either, he realized as he breathed the potent calmness of it in the crowded concourse; there was a warmth to it, an aliveness the opiates didn't have. He walked in the direction of the higher-numbered gates only to have it fade, went back quickly toward the terminal, fascinating whiffs twining through the thick spoor of the airport. For a minute he was sure the excitement in the scent signalled methamphetamine, then LSD; but the screaming tension of the stimulants and hallucinogens was missing, replaced by a


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flowery calmness, the calmness that had made him first think of opiates. A designer drug? But there was a wholesome, almost sweaty smell to it, a smell you didn't get from the laboratory; like something that grew out of the ground in the sun and rain.

He went down a narrow escalator to a small ground floor departure lounge whose tape-patched burgundy carpet was sour with mildew. Two dozen people waited for a flight to Twin Forks, delayed by snow. The spoor was so strong there it made Stane dizzy.

He was sure now it was something new. It was coming from the row of seats by the wall, near the embarkation door. He slouched over and pretended to look at flight booklets ranged on a stand. And he had it.

A woman sat near the embarkation door. She had the kind of long, straight blonde hair that had been out of style for decades, with bangs that crept into blue eyes wide and fascinatingly blind, as if she caught only occasional, vague glimpses of the dingy departure lounge; now and then she squinted as if trying to see it more clearly. She wore a short white dress, and her legs, rounded but long and lithe, were crossed and her hands crossed over them, knotted together.

With shock Stane realized that the spoor came not from the woman's small suitcase, but from *her,* out of her pores, on her breath. The few parts per million of it in the air made him drunk; he tried to imagine what it must be doing to her.

He strolled over to the check-in counter where a beefy ticket agent chewed gum and went through a list on a clipboard. Stane showed him his Narcotics Detection & Interdiction ID in an airline ticket folder.

"You have room on this flight?" he asked. The agent nodded. "The lady in white," Stane said. "Give me her information when I board."

Out by the escalator, he called airport ND&I. "Emergency surveillance, NorthWest flight 962, Twin Forks, departure immediately."

The flight announcement came before they could ask too many questions. He could have requested a surveillance detail or called her in to Twin Forks, but already letting her out of his sight made him uneasy. And he had a perfectly good reason to follow her; it was part of his job to identify new drugs.

The lounge was almost empty when he got back, the open embarkation door letting in the shriek of engines and the choking stench of jet fuel over the far, high scent of winter. He studied the copy of the woman's ticket the agent handed him along with his boarding pass. Her name was Suzanne Telse, and she was going to be late for her Twin Forks connection to Minneapolis.

Stane was the last person off the plane in Twin Forks. The rhino he had snorted was wearing off, space closing in so that now all of him


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seemed cramped inside the modern, empty arrival lounge, shapes of things around him torpid and dark. Snow fell heavily outside big windows. The Departures screen inclining from the ceiling showed only two flights, both Delayed, the one to Minneapolis listed at Gate 6. When Stane got there the woman was sitting in an empty row of seats, staring out at the snow. Half a dozen people argued with an agent at the check-in counter, waving their ticket folders.

Stane needed a snort, but the sight of the woman—her smell was almost hidden from him now—fascinated him. He sank into a chair and watched her.

Soon the agent announced over the intercom to the empty airport: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are sorry to announce that flight 714 to Minneapolis has now been canceled due to snow. We regret any inconvenience this may cause you. If you would like to make overnight arrangements here in Twin Forks, please see me at Gate 6."

The woman in white didn't move, made no sign she had heard. Soon she and Stane were the only passengers in the lounge.

Stane went to the ticket counter. He felt heavy as lead, old as the rotten stones of ancient cities. He licked his dry mouth. "Is there an airport hotel?"

The agent was quickly tallying tickets against a list. She didn't look at him. "Yes, sir, but I'm sorry to say it's filled up."

The hotel connected to the modernistic terminal building through a glass atrium. After Stane flashed his ND&I ID, the front desk man canceled somebody's reservation and put him in a room on the fourth floor. Back at Gate 6, the woman was alone in the departure lounge; the agent had taken her pile of tickets and gone. The Arrival and Departure screens were blank. Stane sat directly across from the woman. She gave no sign that she noticed him.

Behind her the lounge suddenly multiplied itself, abruptly stretching out in all directions, row after row of vinyl seats on grey carpeting as far as he could see, as if mirrors had been set up on the walls, reflecting the lounge in unending perspective. An infinite-regress hallucination, a kind known to be associated with somnophobia; Stane had had them before, but it was still disturbing. His hands gripped the chair arms and he concentrated on the woman in front of him, on the paleness of her hair, the solidity of her shoulders turned so she could look out the window. In a few minutes the far rows of seats got hazy, then disappeared, bringing the lounge back to normal.

He took a deep breath. "Miss?"

She didn't answer, didn't move.

"Miss?"

He stood up awkwardly, took two steps and touched her shoulder.



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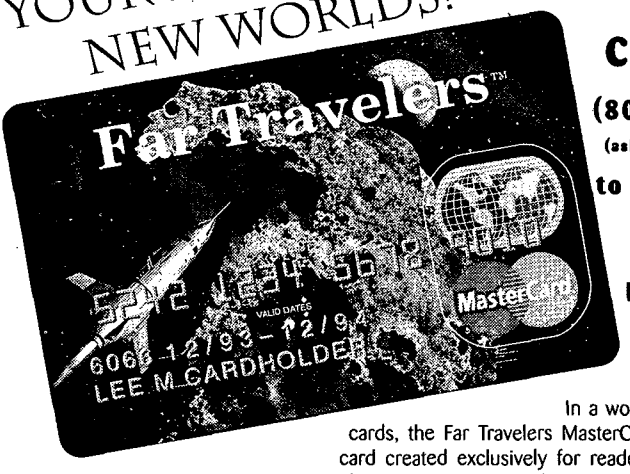


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She looked at him, blue eyes unexpectedly steady.

"You're going to Minneapolis?"

"Yes." Her voice was soft, husky, maybe from tiredness.

"The flight is canceled. Are you going to sit here all night?"

She shifted her shoulders then, to face him. "Do you have a better idea?"

The hotel lobby was empty as Stane carried her bag into the elevator. She didn't look at him as they rode to the fourth floor, or look away. He might have been the bell boy.

The room was small, with one bed and indirect lighting. Stane put her bag on the low dresser. The room and hall outside were very silent even though it was before midnight.

She went into the bathroom and locked the door.

Stane sat on the bed and snorted. As he put the disinfectant and rhinoneurotransmitter away and the room got big as a football field, darkness and silence outside flinging away to endlessness, he woke up enough to realize that the woman hadn't seemed surprised to be offered a bed in his room. Was she that used to being picked up? Or was she some kind of new-fangled decoy? Had a few hundred pounds of cocaine or heroin gone through his airport after she had made him drunk with her smell?

It was creeping under the bathroom door now, twining sinuously through the hotel odors of dust, cleansers, and stale cigarette smoke like a tendril of jasmine. It was *alive,* Stane's freshly primed rhinencephalic synapses told him, the smell not of a drug but of a metabolic process. Something was going on in the woman's body, something incredible.

More tendrils joined the first, spreading and flowering, filling the room thick as a jungle—

—turning to tongues of flame, licking him, whispering with hot breath of lavender sweat and jasmine blood—

He stumbled to the bathroom door and leaned against it.

"Hey." His voice was a faraway drunken sob. "Hey . . . "

The door opened, almost spilling him onto the floor.

The woman stood in a bright background of white tile, naked. Her pale hair fell over milky shoulders, plump breasts, her body smoothly curved, palms of long-fingered hands facing him like a Madonna's. Her eyes were empty blue tunnels of infinite regress.

His trembling hands reached for her.

Then it was strange.

She retreated from him. She slipped sideways in a direction he didn't recognize, and the shift made her body hazy and flat, as if a movie of her was being projected on a tilted sheet of rock crystal.



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He stood dumbfounded. He put out trembling hands. They touched the cool tile of the bathroom wall.

She was still an arm's-length away, her body like glass filled with light. An angel's body, more beautiful than any human's, hands held out to him, face lustful and mocking, burning him with its insane smell—

He didn't wake up; he hadn't been asleep. Static cleared enough for him to realize he existed, then gradually to remember who he was, and finally where he was. He lay naked on a disheveled bed, sheets damp with sweat, grey light leaking around the edges of heavy curtains. He was alone. Leftover static made grainy the outlines of a lamp, a table, a low dresser. The bed under him felt grainy as sand, and his ears hissed. It was like a bad rhino hangover.

Had he snorted that much? He couldn't remember. His head spun with confused memories, trying to separate reality from what must have been somno hallucination.

He went into the bathroom and splashed water on his face. In the mirror it was wild, skeletal, like the faces of the old-time sniffers at the airports where he had done his apprenticeship, before the Regulations got tight, when you could work as long as you wanted without sleep, go on snorting and waking until—

What had finally happened to them? he wondered. Most had dropped out of sight sooner or later, no one knowing exactly how or why, or much caring. The old-timers had joked about Old Telsa coming to get them, taking them away one by one—

*Telsa—*

He stared at himself, thunderstruck. Susan Telsa, the first and most famous experimental sniffer, who had built up an enormous sleep deficit and disappeared while on surveillance, apparently after going into somnophobic psychosis, who had raved about somnophobic sensory distortions being "transition phenomena" leading to a "deeper level of reality"— But it was just a fairy tale, a joke, at best a metaphor: the old lady who comes to take the old sniffers away to the land beyond sleep—

The names—Suzanne Telse and Susan Telsa—had to be a coincidence.

Yet wasn't there a resemblance between the woman in white and Telsa's early pictures?

The airport was almost as empty as it had been last night. Plows had the runways mostly cleared of snow. The woman's spoor was cold, but still faintly detectable.

It was strongest at Gate 8.

Stane flashed his ND&I ID at the agent behind the check-in counter. Suzanne Telse had been on the last flight out of Gate 8, to Des Moines.

* * *



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The four P.M. flight to Des Moines was almost empty. Stane sat by a window with his eyes closed, body exhausted but brain wide open on a bright, silent space, the roar of the jets, buffeting of the plane, even its harsh, recycled smells distant and vague.

The woman had done something to him last night, he was sure, though he could remember almost nothing. It was hard to describe, like a hole punched in his brain through which something poured, something strange. Was that why he was following her again instead of turning her over to a surveillance team? he wondered vaguely. To find out what she had done? Or was there more? Had his pursuit of the drug-runners—and especially of her—taken on in his rhino-deteriorated subconscious the trappings of a bizarre courtship, the only substitute he could now experience after having held human intimacy at a distance so long? But it was strange—he had never had an appetite for women before, nor for anything in this world except the rhino.

The Des Moines airport was small and rundown. The woman's smell was there, but cold, almost undetectable, and on the cracked sidewalk outside the 1950's terminal building where the taxis lined up under a grey sky, it was gone, scattered over the town by a fitful wind.

But she was there, in Des Moines.

Stane got a room in a rundown motel and called Washington ND&I from a pay phone in the parking lot. Sam Marnelli, the day supervisor, was a sniffer himself, retired six years, his catheter surgically removed in accordance with the law. "Where are you?"

"Des Moines. Sorry I forgot to report last night. I—"

"Come in, Stane. We're sending you a replacement."

"That won't work. This is some kind of new designer drug, only recognizable by—"

"Your auth is suspended, Stane. We're going to do a neuro on you. Come in."

An ice flower blossomed in Stane's stomach. "Why?"

"Erratic behavior. Don't worry. If you're clean—"

Stane hung up.

He lay on the hollow motel bed. The room smelled of oil and car exhaust almost as strongly as the parking lot. So it was the end of the line, suddenly, just like that. If he went in for the neuro test they would scrape enough rhino off his synapses to fill a 55 gallon drum. If he didn't go in he would be cut off, with not even the step-down program they used to keep away the withdrawal psychosis. And if he got through withdrawal there was nothing on the other side but the foul, half-lit hell of this world without rhino, and at the end of it death—

He weighed his rhino canister in his hand. It had been almost full at



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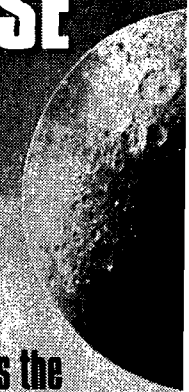

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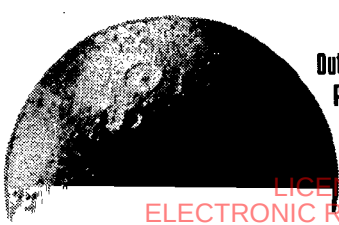

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the beginning of his shift the night before; good for about two dozen snorts.

At his current rate, he had enough rhino for three days.

Maybe enough to find the woman.

"Drive around," he told a cabbie. "I want to see all parts of the city."

"Shut up," he said when the cabbie started to give him a travelogue in his friendly Midwestern twang. After that they drove in silence, Stane's window open, his head singing with a recent snort, through the winter-brown shrubbery and cooking smells of residential neighborhoods, the cold, clean wind of an expressway, the echoing concrete of a business district, perfumed office workers like plastic flowers stuck in styrofoam, the overpowering wild spoor of a cattle-yard. By evening Stane had paid the cabbie $250.

His government-issue sleeping pills were back in Washington, but by this time he shouldn't have needed them. He had been awake almost 100 hours; even the somnophobia didn't let you fight the neurochemical changes leading to sleep forever—at least not until you were a hopeless psychotic. But the hole the woman had left in his brain seemed to be growing bigger, more and more of the strange wakefulness streaming in, bringing now one and now another of his senses into sharp focus. He lay all night and studied the topography of the low motel ceiling, listening to harmonics and overtones he had never heard before in the boom of the TV from the next room.

Until without warning, long past midnight, he remembered something.

—the woman's wet, satin skin flickering unsteadily on his hands, her straining face and sweat-tangled hair, sweaty lips moving, talking intensely—

Whispering: "I come for those who reject sleep."

His heart pounded. He tried to pry his subconscious open further, to remember more, but it slipped away, the sudden sensory image fading.

All the next day and late into the night he rode, sniffing, and when he got back to the motel he had been without sleep for five days. Static hissed quietly like drizzle from the ceiling. He lay on the bed and tried to close his eyes but they opened again, moving restlessly around the room. Then suddenly the static went away as if shut off with a switch, and he lay in an infinitely regressed space, the cigarette-burned dresser and peeling mirror, room door with the plastic disclaimer notices, the tiny dark bathroom repeating themselves as far as he could see in every direction.

And the woman astride him, whispering through swollen lips: " . . . the next world . . . "


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Then she and the infinite regress were gone, replaced again by static.

The next night he caught her smell.

He had been riding all day. His rhino was almost gone. The static was much stronger now; a fog of it blew outside the cab, obscuring everything. But through hissing darkness her spoor came.

What is this place? he asked the cabbie.

Convention Center, the cabbie said. You sure you're all right, buddy?

Take me closer.

The light was deep, dusky blue, and stretching away on both sides was asphalt with streetlights and hedges. Parking lots.

Stane got out onto still, new-smelling sidewalk. A huge shape grew up beyond it. The woman's spoor came from it in faint snatches mixed up with other smells.

There was a glass door in an endless concrete wall. He pushed through it.

Pinkish arc lights a hundred feet up made underwater daylight for thousands of people milling in an ocean of sweat, breath, food, plastic, metal, wood. There was a roar of voices, music, PA system announcements. The woman's smell pierced it all like lightning.

He tried to be careful, following the smell blindly through roaring pink soup. He stepped on toes, blundered into people, tables, and booths. Somewhere in its midst she stood, her blind eyes the only things he could see clearly in the static and pandemonium. He felt the round firmness of her arm.

Somehow he found a door. Out in blue night he pulled her along a sidewalk, then out into the parking lot. The sky was clear now, the full moon floating low above streetlights and hedges like a huge Chinese lantern. Everything was suddenly quiet and clear, the static gone.

"I found you," Stane said hoarsely.

She laughed mockingly. "Congratulations." Yet it flashed on him that finding her in Des Moines and among the camouflaging smells of the Convention Center had been some kind of test.

"Who are you?" he asked her. "What did you do to me in Twin Forks?"

"What you begged me to do."

"And what was that?"

"I broke you open. Waked you. Did you like it?"

"Meaning what? Why can't I sleep?"

"You yourself rejected sleep."

In sudden fury he yanked her toward him. "Explain it to me so I can understand it."

Her head went back, mouth open a little, eyes relaxed and empty, without malice or excitement.

Later he remembered her saying: "You were already a little awake


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because of your artificial sense enhancement, awake enough to find me. You were weary of the epiphenomenal world, begging for the greater Waking. I helped you because once I was like you, and one of the Awakened Ones helped me.

"Once you are Waked there is no more unconsciousness. When the epiphenomenal world is shut out, as in sleep, you live in the underlying world, which mortals see only vaguely, as 'dreams'. There is no more sleep, not even death.

"The greater Waking is a matter of refining the senses, sharpening them to receive the subtle impressions of the underlying world. Your awakened sense of smell drew you to me. Then it was easy to begin the waking of your other senses; in Twin Forks I withdrew a little into the underlying world; to touch me, taste me, you had to follow . . . "

They were resting on a bench under the greenish radiance of a streetlight as dawn tinted the horizon pink and yellow, in a part of the lot far from the Convention Center, where there were no cars.

"There is no death in the underlying world," said the woman. "Death is the tool of the god who rules the epiphenomenal world, who creates its pageant by means of forgetting. Think of what you could see if you didn't have to die, if you were so free of sleep you could go to your next life remembering the last, keep going without ever forgetting, until eternity for you was one long day. There are those who are so free from sleep that they never die. Their perfected metabolisms can be detected by a sufficiently awakened sense, such as smell. We are the Awakened Ones, who are conscious in the underlying world and so go from life to life without forgetting, and awaken others who are ready, who come to us, who reject sleep . . . "

There was a discreet crackle of tires on pavement as a long black limousine with mirrored windows turned the corner at a hedge and came slowly toward them.

The woman stood up. "You're on your own now," she said.

Stane stood up too, uneasily. "What do you—?"

The limousine slowed, almost stopped, and the rear door opened. Hands extending from the dim interior helped the woman in; Stane caught a last flash of her long, lithe leg before the door slammed and the car was gliding away again.

Panic hit him. "Hey!" He jumped toward the door, missing the handle.

The limousine began to pick up speed.

"Hey!" Stane screamed, his voice flat in the vast lot. He sprinted desperately, getting close enough for his hand to slide off the trunk, then tumbling on asphalt. When he struggled up, hands bleeding and suit torn, the car was a hundred feet away, gliding off with maddening aplomb, mirrored rear window glinting in the strengthening yellow light.


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He watched until it was a tiny black spot between the hedges that telescoped into the distance. Then he turned back toward the Convention Center.

There was no Convention Center.

He looked around.

A mild dawn breeze rustled the hedges, and a streetlight near him swayed a little, creaking. There was no other sound. There was nothing in sight in any direction but benches and hedges and streetlights.

Stane fought down panic. He moved carefully toward the nearest bench and sat down to wait until the infinite-regress hallucination went away.

It didn't go away.

In an hour the sun was warm, the sky clear, cloudless blue. There was no sign of the static that should accompany the transition back to normal perception.

Stane was trying to think. His ND&I training said infinite-regress hallucinations were temporary. But apprehension was growing in him, and a strange excitement at what the woman had said. He had always thought Susan Telsa insane, but now something he had read about her was coming back to him: her explanation of the infinite-regress hallucinations. They were a trick the mind played on first entering another world, she had said; in that world space did not exist, so the mind supplied its own "space" in the form of the endless repetition of remembered surroundings.

If the woman in white was Telsa, perhaps he was in that world right now.

Or perhaps this "world" was a hallucination, stable only because he had gone into acute somno psychosis from prolonged rhino use without sleep.

Either way, instinct said he had to find the woman again. If anyone knew what was happening to him, she did.

Trembling, he started to walk in the direction her limousine had disappeared.

He walked for hours on quiet, sun-warmed asphalt. A few times he shinned up streetlights to scour the distance, and every time saw nothing but benches, hedges, streetlights, and empty parking spaces in every direction. The sun was getting toward mid-afternoon when he saw the man.

He was sitting on a bench as if waiting for the parking lot shuttle bus. From a distance his glasses blanked out his eyes; round, wide-rimmed glasses that matched his perfectly round, bald head. The bald head and his robes made him look like a Hare Krishna, except that the robes were mud-brown and had big buttons down the front. He was old.



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Stane ran to him and stood over him, gasping, heart pounding. The old man just stared at him.

"Welcome," the old man said finally. His voice was dry, dusty, as if the mud of his robes had dried up inside him.

"How can I get out of here? Is there a bus?" Now that there seemed to be a chance of escape, Stane's agitation had come back.

"How did you get in?" asked the old man.

Stane stared at him. "Who —?"

"I am the guardian of this place." The old man waved a wrinkled hand.

"What place?"

"Where do you go when you go to bed?"

Fear was coming over him. "Sleep."

"Yet here you are, wide awake. How did that happen?"

"The—the woman—"

"Your kind are not allowed here. Not awake."

He studied Stane coldly.

"Your *woman* and the others like her think they have escaped the fetters that bind everyone else. They are free. They have all the time there is. They are *awake.*" The word was full of weary sarcasm. "But what do you think made her meet you, for example, come to where you were at the right time? What made her bring you here, where she thinks she has her perfect freedom, only to meet *me?*" He stared into Stane's eyes with his black, somehow numbing eyes. "It was *appointed,* that is what. She has no more escaped her fate than you have.

"She may not sleep, and she may see into this place, but she has not escaped all the things that come upon one unawares, and so I still hold sway over her. Would you like to help me in a certain matter?"

Stane licked his lips.

"Would you like to get out of this place?"

"Yes."

"If you look behind this hedge you will find a conveyance. With it you can catch her, exit the same way she does—wait a minute before you go." His eyes pulled Stane back with their numbing force. "All I ask is that you deliver something to her. Something very small."

It lay on his palm, a tiny sack of mud-brown cloth tied with a black string.

"Open this and show it to her with my kindest personal regards," he said wearily. Stane took it with trembling fingers. It was heavy and slightly cold.

"Now," the old man said.

Behind the hedge was a brown, engine-bound motorcycle. And it was almost as if the old man had *become* the motorcycle, because when Stane



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wheeled it back around to the bench, he was gone. Or had he walked off behind another hedge while Stane was getting it?

Stane knew how to ride a motorcycle. Soon he was crouching behind the windshield and rushing through a collapsing, telescoping perspective of hedges/benches/streetlights, feeling the powerful vibration of the cycle and the small bumps under his wheels, trying to calculate how long it would take to catch the limousine, assuming it had kept on all this time, and in the same direction.

Three hours later Stane's arms were cramped from holding the cycle. But when the sun was touching the horizon, sending pools of blue shadow across the asphalt, he thought there was a black dot at the very limit of the endless perspective ahead. He gunned the cycle forward, and in a minute the rear of the limousine was rushing toward him as if it were standing still. His heart pounded, wondering what they would do when they saw him, but the limousine just kept floating along at a constant speed, until Stane had to brake sharply to keep from running into it.

There was no sign at all from the limo. Stane couldn't see through the rear window. He pulled alongside. The mirrored glass reflected in curved distortion the vast, pink sunset, wispy clouds low over the horizon tinted pink and purple.

He banged on the driver's side window. The car continued to cruise along obliviously. He tried to cup his hand over the glass and put his face close enough to see in, but the glimpses he got leaning far over and wrestling the cycle with the other hand told him nothing. Finally, after a few tries, and almost crashing the cycle, he popped one of the rear doors.

It stuck half unlatched. He yanked at it again, before whoever was inside could pull it shut. It came open, showing a swatch of blue carpeting and velour upholstery. He nosed into the lee of the door and dived in on his stomach, heard the clank and scrape as the cycle went down. He wriggled his legs into the car, slammed the door behind him.

The woman was there. But not as he could ever have imagined her: barely human, even. In the radiance of her he realized also that he was not inside a car, that there was no car, no motorcycle, no endless parking lot, that these had all been illusions, or rather symbols; that there had been no distance between him and the woman all this time, opening up as the illusory limo drove, that there had never been any distance between them at all; that if only he could have risen to the test, woken up a little more, he would have realized this instead of using the delusive device of the dream-motorcycle to give himself the illusion of chasing her—the dream-motorcycle that had been pandered to him before he had



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had a chance to waken further. And he saw more, wrapped in the woman-creature's membrane of light, which pulsed, as if she lived on a blood of light, her veins reaching to the sun and all the other spheres, a tiny capillary going even into his own brain: he saw that *everything* he had thought was real—the airports and drug-runners, the cities where he had lived, his dingy apartments, his coworkers, the rhino, his body, even the subtle world he had entered with the woman's help—were unreal in themselves, merely symbols projected by the deep Real to signify Itself to those who slept, perceiving It only vaguely in shifting dreams. In an instant of incinerating clarity he comprehended It, the vision he knew now he had always sought: everything, the whole universe a play of light and shadow glittering from an abstract, perfect diamond of infinite facets, infinite clarity, infinite light—

In his side something began to throb, heavy and cold. A dry, dusty voice came from it like a radiation of darkness, a black gas. "Give this to her with my kindest personal regards," it croaked, giving off a bad smell.

Fear pierced him. He had brought into this light—

"Give it to her," croaked the thing with a cloud of black gas. "Unwrap it and hold it up to her. Shake her and make her look at it."

Suddenly he could vaguely feel that he was wrapped in flesh again. He fumbled blindly for the pocket in which he had put the brown-wrapped thing so he could throw it out of the car, which too had become vaguely visible—

The thing was heavy, cold in his hands—

"Give it to her," croaked the thing. "Give it to her." Its black gas seemed to disturb her; she trembled, and her brilliant tendrils turned sickly grey where it touched.

"Unwrap it," chanted the croaking voice. "Unwrap it."

His shaking hands unwrapped it.

It was a chunk of darkness.

Dead black, like a hole in his hand, which sucked at his attention, drew him into itself like water down a drain, whirling and vortexing down into the darkness of—

"No!" croaked the voice, fading from his hearing. "It's not for you. Give it to her. To *her*. Give it to. . ."

Sleep.

His shoulder ached and his face hurt. He was cold: his ears stung with cold, hands numb with it, feet burning with it. For a long while he was unable to move, unsure where he was or if he was dying—

With an effort he opened his eyes.

There was unsteady ground, glaring dark light, stark shadows.



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Hardness under him—he was lying—

He scrabbled his arms and legs suddenly, and pushed— His face peeled painfully away from asphalt—

He was in the Convention Center parking lot, and it was night, and cold, and he was sick.

He scrambled up desperately, leaned on a bench. The effort made him retch, again and again.

When he could, he looked around, straining his streaming eyes into the darkness.

The vast concrete bulk of the Convention Center rose 200 yards away.

He sobbed, leaning on the bench, the somno hallucinations swirling not far away, but temporarily diminished by his recent unconsciousness, his merciful sleep.

It had gone too far, he realized dimly through his nausea and sleep-revulsion and sudden, sharp rhino-hunger. He had to go in, give himself up, take the step-down program, and after that the ND&I desk job if they would still give it to him—

He breathed deeply, steadied himself, and started hobbling shakily in the direction of the Convention Center, where there would be a telephone—

His right hand was clenched on something. It hurt to open it, the muscles spasming.

In the greenish streetlight glare a black hole lay in his palm, seeming to absorb light and consciousness, sucking him dizzily down like water down a drain—

With panicked strength he threw it from him, as hard as he could.

Just a black rock, he told himself, trembling, an asphalt-coated pebble from the parking lot that he had picked up to play a part in his hallucinations.

But strangely, he didn't hear it fall. There was no distant clatter as it hit the asphalt; only silence, as if it had disappeared in the air, diffused into the darkness above him.

He started again toward the Convention Center, a coldness creeping over him now as he thought of his life to come. ●


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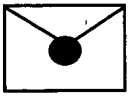

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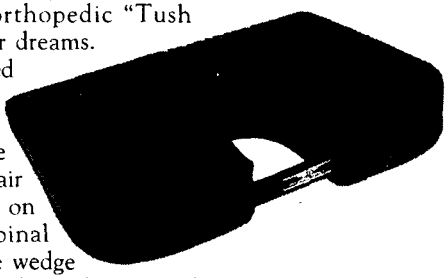

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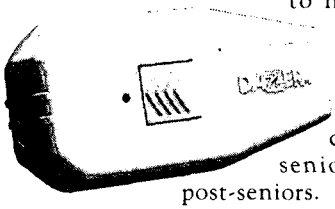

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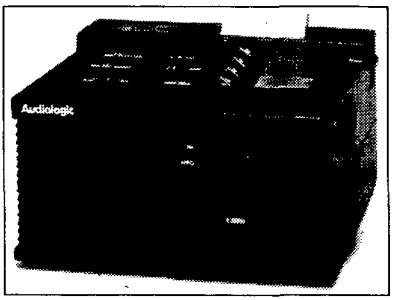


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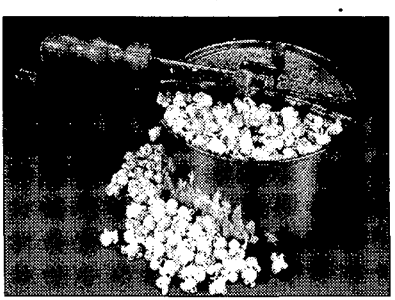

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Chris Willrich

# LITTLE DEATH

Chris Willrich is a native of Washington state whose varied career has included stints as a copy editor for a newspaper on Guam, deckhand and busser on a harbor cruise ship, and librarian for a health-care office. A 1988 graduate of Clarion West, Mr. Willrich recently moved to the San Francisco Bay area where he is temping at a number of jobs and writing as much science fiction and fantasy as possible. "Little Death" is his first story for *Asimov's*.

Illustration by Laurie Harden

Billy MacAferty found Little Death after he ran through the hot fields and into the woods, sore from the bee stings and Dad's bellowing and the sharp thwacks of Marc's rawhide belt. It was Billy's tenth birthday. For his birthday, Dad had given him a job. "A man's job," Dad said. "Your Mom's gone, time to stop being a mama's boy." Billy had to smash the new nest of killer bees in the old wood of the awning over the farmhouse door. Dad gave him a ladder and a shovel. Billy had to do it without hurting the stained-glass window Mom had set above the door before she died. The awning was high, and Billy had to climb to the step second to the top of the ladder. When he swung the shovel, he got unbalanced. He almost fell. He caught himself, and he didn't hit the window, but he missed the nest; and the angry bees swarmed out.

Dad found Billy crying behind the barn, a couple dozen bee stings on his arms and face. Dad swore. "Ran away crying like a little girl," he said. "I ought to whack you." Dad reached for his belt buckle, and Billy ran again; Dad's laughter followed him. Dad hardly ever whipped Billy, especially if Billy showed he was scared. Marc was different. When Billy rounded the corner of the barn, his fifteen-year-old brother was there. Marc tackled Billy, pinned him by sitting on his back. Marc took off his belt. "The old man doesn't have guts enough to do what's right, kid," Marc said, "so I've got to." Marc whipped Billy ten times, once for each of his goddamned years, Marc panted. He usually did to Billy what Dad only threatened to do, like he was the family torturer. Dad never stopped him. "If you're going to lie there and take it like a woman, Billy," he'd

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say, "there's nothing *I* can do to help you." At last Marc let Billy go, and Billy ran across the fields.

He stopped, gasping, by the stream that ran just inside the woods. The farm was a hundred acres in Thurston County, Washington, that Mom had inherited from her parents, but sixteen acres of it had never been cleared. Billy spent a lot of time in those uncleared acres, climbing sap-sticky fir trees and following the stream into the rocky hills at the edge of the property. "This is your real inheritance, Billy," Mom had told him. "These woods are all ours. That's why we came here from California, so we wouldn't have to swelter in L.A. Now you can grow up *right*." She said that a month before she shot herself.

Billy knelt beside the stream, letting his knees get wet with damp pine needles and mud. He stared down at his reflection in the water's sunglare: blond curls, big blue eyes. "You look like a *girl*," he said to the image. "You're weak. I hate you. *I hate you!*" The rage swallowed him. He smashed the reflection with his fist. It splattered into waves and harsh points of sunlight, but it came back. He smashed it again. "*I hate you!*" If he wasn't weak, he could stop Marc from whipping him, stop Dad's whiskey days. If he had been strong, Mom wouldn't have killed herself. "*I hate you!*" Billy's reflection kept coming back, and each time it looked more angry. He called a truce, and they stared at each other.

That was when he noticed the black shape below the reflection.

It was like two wings set at right angles, a piece of rotten log, maybe, or even a dead bird. But it was so *black*—Billy reached down, stretched his hand through his reflected face, ran his fingers over the rocks and mud, and touched the thing. It was smooth, and cold, and dense, like metal. He put his hand around it. It felt right to hold it, like it was something that *ought* to be held. He pulled it from the stream.

It was a gun.

A revolver, compact and clean-lined, with a short, slim muzzle and a handgrip just right for a boy. Mud and silt covered it; Billy splashed it around in the water. The gun sparkled as water dripped off its edges and curves. Except for the red trace-lines that followed the barrel and outlined the cylinder and handgrip, the gun was jet black.

Billy got his hand around the grip, amazed. He loved guns. He stole peeks at Dad's collection sometimes. How did it get here? Maybe Dad threw it away. It looked like a custom job; Dad had a custom rifle painted the exact color red of his truck. Mom had laughed when Dad brought it home, and afterward he had never used it. He kept it in the garage until Mom used it to kill herself. Maybe the revolver was for Mom. It was made for someone with small hands. Maybe Dad threw it out when she died.



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Maybe. It was hard to think about Dad or Mom, with this gun, so strange and real, in his hand. It made other things seem far away. He liked that. He stroked the trigger tentatively with his finger.

"Hello, Billy," the gun said.

The voice was like crystal, when you wet your finger in the glass and circle it around the edge until the crystal hums; and the gun vibrated gently against Billy's hand as it spoke. But it was also the voice of the kind of woman you'd expect to find using crystal goblets every day, using them and smashing them against the fireplace stones whenever she felt like it, smiling behind her red, painted lips, giving a shake of her long, dark hair. A voice that seemed to know Billy well. A voice that implied many things. Billy's skin prickled.

He laughed, feeling ridiculous, half because he was talking to a gun, half because of that million-dollar voice. "Are you my birthday present?"

The gun laughed, and Billy got a warm shiver down his spine.

"You can think of me that way, if you like." The voice had a trace of mockery, just enough to make a point, not enough to hurt. "But friends don't usually think of each other as presents, Billy. And I'd like to be your friend."

Billy tilted the gun experimentally, waved it around to feel its weight.

"I like it when you do that," the gun said.

"I'm talking to a *gun*," he said.

She laughed again. She? *Oh* yeah. That laugh was all *she*. Billy blushed, but smiled.

"And I'm talking to a *boy*," she said. "I could get used to it; I'm sure *you* can. My name's Little Death, Billy. I come from the future. Walk with me a ways."

Billy walked toward the hills, pointing Little Death at rocks, trees, clouds. "Good name for a gun," he offered, not knowing what to say.

"I'm glad you like it. I hope you like *me*."

"I do," he whispered.

He climbed the tallest hill, stuffing Little Death's muzzle under his belt when he had to go hand-over-hand up a steep face. "Don't go off now," he said. "That's my family's prized possession." It was Marc's phrase.

"I'll be very careful."

The hilltop was pretty small, with five fir trees and an undergrowth of ferns and nettles. There was a killer bee nest on the other slope, and Billy hadn't risked coming up here for a while, but he wanted to take Little Death someplace good. Here you could see most of the farm. He pointed Little Death toward the pea fields. "Those are the hands, they're going home now, it's five. They're mostly high-school kids, it's their summer job. Most of the older hands fight with Dad and they don't work here very long."



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"I see."

"Dad thinks he's a farmer, but he doesn't know anything about it. He used to act in commercials, so he thinks he can act his way through anything. Mom was the one who grew up here, but Dad never listened to her. He never listens to anyone."

"I'll listen to you, Billy," Little Death said, as if that's what he'd really been asking.

"You will?" He put his free hand over the top of her. She felt warm, as if all that black metal was storing up heat. A rare cool wind blew over the hill. "Have you fixed the Greenhouse Effect in the future?"

"We've fixed everything," she said. "No, I won't lie to you. Not *everything*. But so much that the problems left over are welcome challenges, not burdens. But, no, even that's a lie, or I wouldn't be here." Little Death was quieter now. "You see, Billy, there's an enemy."

The sun was lower. Dad would want him inside soon. "An enemy?"

"The enemy inside, Billy. The enemy in the skull. The thing that makes humans into Neros or Hitlers. In my time, we have too much technology too easily available for the enemy to be set loose. Anyone who gave in to the enemy, even for a moment, could destroy the world. So we stamp the enemy out, by slaying him when he began, in our past. We choose agents and help them. Agents like you."

But Billy was hardly listening. When Little Death said *the enemy in the skull* he remembered something Dad said after Mom died. *She was haywire in her skull. Everything had to be perfect—I wasn't running the farm right, wasn't raising the kids right. But she did things right, oh, boy. Most women just OD on pills and time it so somebody can save them. Not Lisa. Blew her brains out the back of her skull, just exactly right. Didn't even leave a note. Just the act, the act of hate. Bitch swallowed my hunting rifle just like she wouldn't suck on my—*

Billy raised the gun.

*—And what are you looking at, little man? You think it's my fault, Billy? Is that what you think? She's the one who pulled the trigger. She's in hell now, I guess. You want your mommy? You really want her? Then you can go to hell too.*

He put the gun to his head.

*Shouldn't be hard. We're all going to hell.*

He pulled the trigger.

There was a last instant in which Billy wanted to stop himself. It was like those times when he'd be angry and scream without planning to. Only this time he had a gun in his hand and was blowing his brains out. The thought came just as the trigger clicked.

The shot screamed in his head. It was a shattering *crack* that trailed into a long, metallic whine. His skull rang at a high pitch, which slowly



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deepened and faded. His hand stung with the recoil. Every bit of his skin tingled.

When the sound faded, Little Death hummed softly, "Oh, Billy."

"I'm alive," Billy whispered.

"I would never hurt you." Her voice was so soft. Billy could imagine her holding him gently to her breast, slowly stroking his head. She would do that, if she could. "No bullet I fire can interact with ordinary matter unless I wish it to. Oh, Billy, how could you kill yourself, now that you have a *friend?*"

Billy couldn't answer. And now his face twisted without his wanting it to, his eyes scrunched tight, and he started sobbing. He hated it, but he couldn't stop. "I'm sorry," he said between gulps of air. "I'm sorry." He was as sorry for crying as for trying to shoot himself. He held Little Death to his face, felt her warmth and her strength.

"Sorry is nice," said Little Death. "But you can hardly say 'sorry' when you're *dead,* can you? You need some discipline, Billy, if you're going to face the enemy."

Billy pulled Little Death away from his face. Somehow he forced himself to stop crying.

"That's better," Little Death said. "But I'd like you to do something more. Will you do something more for me, Billy?"

"Anything," he said.

"Cross the hilltop, going east. Climb a short way down the other face."

He crossed and climbed down, though he knew what he'd find there.

"Your palm's sweating, Billy," Little Death said. "Don't be afraid."

"There's a killer bee nest here."

"I know."

The bees crowded and crawled within the near end of a rotted Douglas fir which pointed at a steep angle down the rocky slope. Billy clung to the hillside a stone's throw away. He could see flying bits of yellow-orange wriggle into and out of the holes and fissures in the wood. A lone bee buzzed suddenly beside his ear. Billy swatted at it with the gun.

"Little Death, there's a reason why they're called killer bees."

"I know."

Three bees circled Billy now. "They'll swarm anything that gets near the nest."

"I know. Move a foot closer."

Billy hesitated; but Little Death sounded so sure he'd do it that he couldn't disappoint her. He shuffled closer, kicking pebbles loose to tumble down the slope. He saw a few more bees each time he looked up. Their droning wing-noise sounded angry and accusing. *Who are you?* they seemed to demand. *What are you doing here?*

"You think they're so strong," whispered Little Death. "You think



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everybody's stronger than you. You think you can't stop your brother from beating you. You think you have to listen to your father's ranting. You're wrong. That nest could be your father's head. And this could be your father's *reward.*"

Little Death trembled in Billy's hand. He understood. A dozen bees spiraled around him; beyond them pulsed the relentless life of the nest. Billy raised Little Death. He fired.

He only got a quick look; then he had to run from the orange frenzy in the air. But it seemed to Billy that the whole end of the tree blew apart in a rush of old bark and dirty sawdust, fragments of broken honeycomb flashing like golden shrapnel within the cloud. It was hard to be sure, because he had to run for his life.

"Yes," whispered Little Death.

Billy ran pellmell down the slope, laughing and terrified. Bees droned somewhere above and behind him, but they didn't feel near. Billy wondered if they were stunned somehow by Little Death's shot. He sprinted downhill in a cloud of dust. He whooped.

Little Death laughed with him.

Billy couldn't remember feeling so good. He stopped himself by throwing himself at the ground and rolling, came out of it face up to a sky of green needles, circled by the spokes of fir trunks. His chest heaved. It hurt. He felt exhausted, happy, safe; he breathed the smell of tree sap and pine cones and mud, and the dusty wind from the hills. It was good to lie here. It was good to hold Little Death.

Then he realized that it was twilight. A few high stars already shone through a gap in the branches overhead. Billy was supposed to be in by sunset. He swore automatically and started running up the nearest low hill, then over, then down, toward home.

"Don't be afraid," said Little Death.

"I'm not."

"Don't lie to *me,*" she said, and the vibration in Billy's hand almost hurt.

Marc was waiting in front of the farmhouse when Billy got there. The sky was deep blue, with many stars. Marc's fingers clawed a tuft of his own brown hair; he twisted it while he waited, as if it was an everyday gesture. For *him,* it was. He looked at Billy like he hated him and was glad to see him at the same time. "Dad said he ought to slap your ass until it bleeds, for worrying him like that," Marc said, moving forward. Billy had a good idea what was going to happen.

Billy just stood there a moment, remembering how running only made it worse the next time. But then he remembered something else: the bees' nest exploding in a cloud of wood dust and honeycomb.

Billy raised Little Death.



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"What the hell is that?" Marc said, noticing her for the first time. "What are you doing, Billy?" Marc's expression changed. Before he'd had a hungry look. Now he looked confused. And maybe a little afraid. "What do you think you're doing, Billy? What are you doing?"

Little Death didn't speak, but Billy understood the vibration in her handgrip. *Use me.*

Billy remembered Marc's face leering at him, screaming at him, laughing at Billy when Billy was in trouble. Then he imagined that face flying apart in fragments of bloody skin and muscle and bone. It was only a trigger-pull away—

Billy hesitated.

Marc jumped him.

They sprawled together into the tangle of rose bushes near the front door. Branches and thorns cut Billy. Marc lurched forward and pressed most of his body weight against Billy's chest. While Billy fought to breathe, Marc pried Little Death from his fingers.

Marc raised himself, panting, still kneeling on Billy's chest. He looked the gun over. "Well, well."

"Let go of her!" Billy screamed. "She's *mine!*" He struggled to get free. Marc had to stop looking at the gun and pin Billy's arms. This put Little Death, in Marc's right hand, a few inches from Billy's left. He tried to reach her but Marc had him pinned too tight.

"She?" Marc said. "*Jesus,* you're stupid! Ships and planes are 'she,' shithead, not guns. Guns are 'it.' Where'd you get it?" When Billy didn't answer, Marc started pushing Billy's arms back in the wrong direction.

"In the woods," Billy said.

"Oh, sure. In the woods. Right." Marc kept pushing Billy's arms. "You lying shit, you stole it! *Didn't* you? Stole it from *Dad.* God, when he finds out, he'll take this gun and crack your head open!"

Billy couldn't get free. Marc was too strong. Everything had fallen apart. The afternoon with Little Death was gone, wiped away, like a stupid dream. Marc was the reality.

What if it really *was* Dad's gun, bought for Mom, like Billy had first thought? Then Marc was right; Dad would go crazy if he saw it. But if it was Dad's gun, how could it be Little Death, a gun from the future? How could she have talked to him? She *couldn't* have.

Unless he was crazy.

It felt like the walls of Billy's skull were pressing tight against his brain, and everything was going dark. Billy stopped fighting Marc and shut his eyes.

Somewhere above him, Marc said, "Of course, he doesn't *have* to find out." Marc stopped pushing Billy's arms back, and Billy felt an ache spread through his shoulders. He didn't reply. Marc went on. "Dad might



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think someone *else* stole it, if both of us say we don't know anything. We could blame one of the hands. I might do that, if I got to keep the gun. What do you say?"

Billy didn't say anything. Marc raised his legs and slid forward so he sat on Billy's chest and his legs pinned Billy's arms. Billy heard a *click* followed by many soft *clinks* as Marc popped open Little Death's cylinder and rotated it.

"No bullets," Marc said. "Pretty stupid, pointing a gun without bullets."

No bullets? thought Billy. Had there only been two?

He heard Marc snap the cylinder back in place. Then he felt a warm metallic O press against his forehead.

"But then, maybe I'm lying," Marc said. He pulled the trigger.

*Click.*

No bullets. Were there only two? But Billy had fired at his own head and there was only sound, no bullet. *No bullet I fire can interact with ordinary matter,* Little Death had said, *unless I wish it to.*

"Maybe I carried a bullet with me and put it in just now," Marc said. "Maybe it'll come up—right—*now.*"

*Click.*

Maybe, thought Billy, Little Death's bullets don't exist at all until she *needs* them. But that's crazy. Maybe there is no Little Death. No bullets. Just Billy. Billy dreaming in the daytime.

"You're getting scared, pal. You're losing it."

*Click.*

No! Little Death is real! Little Death's my friend! Billy trembled with his need for her. Marc chuckled and twisted the gun barrel tight against Billy's forehead.

Then the tip of the barrel vibrated: gently—but definitely, like a single pulse beat.

Little Death was *real.*

Billy would fight for her.

"Okay," he told Marc. "You can have the gun."

"Of course I can have the gun, I—"

Marc wasn't paying enough attention; Billy squirmed hard with his whole body and got his arms free. He grabbed Little Death. Marc tried to hold onto her but he was trying harder to keep Billy underneath him, and Billy managed to tear the gun away. He was still pinned but he pointed Little Death at Marc's chest. Her handgrip trembled.

Goodbye, Marc.

Billy put pressure on the trigger.

But he stopped.

Little Death vibrated harder; Billy's hands stung. If he pulled the



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trigger, she would create a bullet in her chamber and launch it through Marc's heart, and Marc's blood would spout and drain his life away in long warm gushes and Marc's brain would die for lack of blood and his arms would go slack and he would shake a little and slump over and his mouth would hang open and his eyes would stare out like old marbles.

Billy didn't fire.

Then the moment was over, and Dad yelled from the porch. "Get inside! Both of you. If you two can't keep your hands off each other, you can use the bedroom!" Marc and Billy stood up. Billy was careful to keep Little Death hidden behind a rose bush. Dad stared at them, his mouth set as if he'd eaten something rotten. He was a tall, lean man who always stood straight, like someone important. He had a scraggly beard and mustache, wore old blue jeans and a tight green polo shirt. His eyes were a little bloodshot the way they often were in the evening. "My *God!*" he said distinctly. Dad still talked with an actor's voice, especially when he was drinking. He turned back inside and slammed the door, hard enough to set the bees buzzing in the nest above.

"Give me the gun," Marc said.

"Go to hell!" Billy yelled. "My God, you're *stupid!*" Billy hardly knew what he was saying. It was like trying to shoot himself earlier; the anger just boiled out of him and found a shape. He'd never dared yell at Marc like this, but now he couldn't stop. Billy could have *killed* Marc, and now the idiot was giving him orders. Marc owed Billy, even if he didn't know it. So Billy screamed, "You're a fool! What if I'm setting you up? Making you think I don't have bullets so I can get you later? Huh? What if I just smash your head when you're asleep? What if I stopped being *scared*? You'd *never* be safe. I'd find a way to kill you! I'd get you! You know why? I hate you *more*. You're bigger. But I hate you more."

Billy's voice had gone from a hot scream to a cold whisper. He didn't know that he could sound that way. He backed away, went around the rose bushes, walked to the front door. Marc didn't follow him. Marc stood staring, with a blank expression on his face that was scarier than a mean one. He just stared at Billy. His mouth formed a strange, hungry smile. But he stayed where he was.

"Little *shit!*" he yelled, as Billy went through the door.

"Why didn't you use me?" Little Death whispered. But Billy wasn't sure. And besides, Dad was here. Billy tucked Little Death under his shirt.

"Billy," Dad said from the reclining chair, his back to Billy, not looking up from his *Hustler* magazine. "When I make a rule, I make it for a reason. I want the family inside at six so we can eat. Go to your room. No dinner for you tonight."

Billy was just glad to go upstairs, and he was too excited to be hungry



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right now. As Billy started upstairs, Dad said, "I do my best for you kids, and what do I get? No, don't answer that, Billy," he added in a louder voice. "God knows I don't *expect* any answers!"

As soon as Billy closed the door of the small room he shared with Marc, Little Death said, "You could have killed Marc. He would never have hurt you or anyone else again."

"Are you mad at me?"

Little Death didn't answer. Billy became afraid. Little Death had appeared out of nowhere. For the first time Billy realized that she could just as easily *disappear* too. He ran his fingers along her barrel. "Say something, please."

Downstairs, Dad said, "Marc. You hear any gunshots today?"

"Gunshots?" Marc said. "No, why?"

"I heard some. Thought maybe you'd know about it."

"No, sir. Maybe it's hunters."

"Must be pretty stupid hunters if they'd risk ten-thousand-dollar fines." Dad said in his you're-so-stupid voice.

"Yeah, well, it could happen."

"Sure. It could also happen that I'll check the gun collection in the morning and make sure everything's there. I could also smack the butt of any young thief with the same gun he stole. Or I could break his hand with it, so he'd know better next time. That could happen too."

"Yeah, well, I guess it's time I got to bed now."

"Sure. Good night, Marc."

Marc's footsteps thumped on the stairs. Billy turned to face the wall and relaxed so he'd look asleep. He held Little Death with both hands, pressed to his chest. "Please stay with me," he whispered.

Marc came in. Billy shut his eyes. A dresser drawer groaned open and Marc's clothes fell with soft thumps to the floor. Marc's footsteps crossed the room and stopped beside the bunk bed. For a long moment there was no sound from the ladder. Then it finally creaked, and Billy heard Marc slump into the upper bunk.

Billy shifted his head so he could brush Little Death's black form with his lips. She was warm and smooth. "I'll kill him tomorrow," he said in a tiny whisper, making sure she felt his lips move.

After a moment she vibrated an answer; and Billy almost cried because it felt like *I love you.*

But Billy dreamed that Little Death disappeared; enemies were all around him, and when he reached for her, she was gone.

He woke up hearing something thudding, many times against the window. Small thuds. Sunlight filled his eyes. Billy pulled down the covers. He felt that something was wrong, but couldn't think of what. Then he remembered Little Death.



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She was gone.

Billy felt sick. For a moment he believed that she must have left him because he woke up without remembering her. But that was stupid. She wouldn't have left him so easily, he was sure of that. But what if she had never been real at all?

More thuds on the window. Billy got up to look.

The bees. They buzzed and slammed into the window, at least a dozen of them, like little bits of gold anger. Billy looked with sick fascination at their dark eyes, their antennae, their many pairs of legs. These killer bees were smaller than the old bees, Mom said, but they were *angrier,* angry the way people got in this hot weather that let the killer bees live so far north. The window was pretty close to the front door and the bees' nest. Something had riled them up.

Crack! Something hard hit the house by the front door. The bees swirled like a living cyclone. Billy looked out into the yard.

It was Marc. He stood a stone's throw from the house beside a cardboard box full of rocks. He lifted a new one in his right hand and leaned back to chuck it.

In his left hand he held Little Death.

When he cocked his arm to throw, Marc saw Billy at the window. Marc smiled. He dropped the rock and shifted Little Death to his right hand. He held her by the barrel, the bottom of the handgrip pointed forward, like she was a hatchet. He moved forward several steps and arched his back to throw.

"No!" Billy cried.

Marc threw the gun. Billy heard Little Death hit the front door, then fall with a scraping clatter to the concrete porch. The bees swirled in a frenzy.

Billy ran. He hurled himself down the stairs and yanked the front door open. Bees rushed in. Billy dove through them, flailing them away from his face, until he found the black pistol lying on the concrete. He hardly noticed the stings as he scooped her up and ran. Little Death hummed and trembled in his grip, and it seemed the bees veered off, dropped behind. Billy kept running. "Little Death," he gasped, "are you okay?"

"Billy," she said. "Marc is escaping."

She was right. Marc was running too, in a different direction, toward the barn. Billy followed him. "He'll pay for hurting you," Billy promised.

"He couldn't hurt me," Little Death said. "It's *you* I worry about, darling."

Billy thrilled to hear her call him that. He ran harder.

He rounded the corner of the barn and stopped short. Marc stood there, in front of the half-open doors. Marc looked at Billy, then gazed inside,



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squinting. "Dad!" he shouted. "Dad! Come here! Billy's got your gun! Billy's the one who took your gun!" He looked at Billy again and smiled. "Gotcha!"

So Billy had to deal with Dad and Marc both. All right. You both asked for it.

Billy held Little Death in a gunfighter's pose and fired at a spot just in front of Marc's feet. The gun thundered and kicked back at Billy's hand. The spot before Marc erupted into a small cloud of brown dust. The wind caught it and made it twist, unravel, drift away.

Billy blew smoke from the tip of Little Death's barrel, raised her smoothly, aimed her between Marc's eyes. "Got you," he said.

Marc stood unmoving, staring at the gun barrel. "I didn't load it," he said. "I didn't put any bullets in!" He seemed not angry or frightened, but confused.

You tried to hurt my friend, Billy thought, holding Little Death steady. You deserve to die.

"*Yes,* Billy, yes," the gun said, in a voice that was half a moan.

Marc's face was blank, uncomprehending, as Billy squeezed the trigger.

Had Marc worn any other look, shown any hate or fear, Billy would have killed him. But Marc looked lost and numb, and once again, knowing how easily he could destroy his brother, Billy did not.

As he fired, he twisted his aim just to one side of Marc's head. The noise made Billy blink, and when he opened his eyes, Marc was still there.

Little Death protested. "Don't be weak, Billy!"

Billy fired her into the air. "*Run!*" he screamed.

Marc's face was white, his eyes wide.

"*Finish* him, Billy!" Little Death said.

Billy fired again, and again. "Run, Marc!" he yelled between shots. "Run from Little Death! Run from me!"

Marc ran. He ran far off through the fields, small clouds of dust rising behind him. He didn't look back.

Billy laughed and kept firing. A cool breeze cut through the dry air. It felt good against his skin, against the throb of the bee stings. Marc ran away, he thought. Marc ran away! He felt proud, because he'd beaten a monster, and noble, because he'd shown mercy. I love you, Little Death. You made everything right.

Billy stopped firing and lowered Little Death, breathing hard. "We did it."

Little Death's voice was like a slap. "Oh. We did it, did we? What did *we* do, brave Billy? We slept beside an enemy we'd threatened. We let



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him steal our weapon. And when we had the chance to correct our mistakes, we let him *escape!* Do you think you've 'cured' Marc of his nature, Billy? No. Marc divides the world into masters and victims, with himself in between. All you've done is become a master in his eyes. He'll just find more victims. Probably, he'll *father* them." Little Death's voice was airy, mocking. Billy felt suddenly small and stupid. Of course, it was just dumb pride that made him spare Marc. He could still please Little Death, though; Marc couldn't have gotten far—

In the darkness beyond the door, someone laughed.

Billy turned and looked into the barn.

It was Dad, of course. Dad sat, grey in the shadows, just beyond the doorway's square of light, sat inside the small, open cabin of the broken-down Caterpillar harvester. Dad had been promising to fix it since months before Mom died. A toolbox sat beside Dad's outstretched legs on the engine housing. A whiskey bottle sat on his crotch, cradled in his hands. He looked at Billy, chuckling.

"A gun that talks," Dad said. He spoke loud and clear, like he was quoting Shakespeare on a stage. "That's a good one, Billy. And you know what? It makes perfect sense." He drank a swig. "Of course she couldn't be any gun. No. Not one of mine. I knew those shots were for me yesterday. I knew she was closing in. But none of my guns are missing. Then I see you, there, with her. Now I get it. Not my gun, but one I tried to buy for her. Showed her the catalog picture. Self-defense, I said. It's ugly, she said. You're no Venus yourself, I said." He held the bottle to his lips for another long gulp, pulled it away. "She's *right,* you know. You should have dusted your brother. Worthless *shit, son* of a worthless shit." Dad sobbed. Then he laughed. "Yeah, she's right, your mother. Rotten boys make rotten fathers. And rotten fathers make rotten boys." He chuckled. "Any responsible son-of-a-bastard would kill himself before he let the cycle go on." He pounded the engine housing with his foot. "But when was I ever responsible?"

Dad lowered his head so that his brow touched the bottle's mouth. "Oh, Lisa, you're always perfect. You die by a gun, now you come *back* as one!"

Billy's voice shook. "She's not *Mom,* Dad! She's from the future! Her name's Little Death!"

"Oh, Jesus, Lisa, that's sweet!" Dad made a strangled noise, almost a laugh. "Tell the kid that your name's an old euphemism for *orgasm!* Oh, that's sick, that's beautiful. I love you, you bitch!"

Little Death said, very softly, "Kill him, Billy."

Billy's hand tightened on her grip. "Kill him?"

"He *wants* to die. He *deserves* to die. He hurt you, and your mother, and your brother, far worse with his words than he ever could have with



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his fists. He's still trying to hurt you *now,* Billy, with this show of remorse. Like Marc, he acts differently when he sees his death coming for him. But unlike Marc, he hungers for it. Yet he fears to eat."

She whispered, a whisper that filled the space of the barn. "Don't you, Mr. MacAferty?"

Dad lurched up, climbed down from the harvester. He still held the bottle. He didn't look at it. "Lisa," he said.

"Come and eat," Little Death said.

"Lisa!" Dad said, moving forward. "*Baby.*"

Things twisted in Billy's stomach. He raised the gun.

"Let go of your mother," Dad said. "*You* can't give her what she wants."

"What does she want!" Billy wailed. The black weapon shifted in his trembling hands.

"She wants *me.*" Dad laughed hoarsely. "C'mere, Lisa." He grabbed for Little Death. Billy smelled his hot, drunken breath.

"No!" Billy dodged. He backed away from Dad, aimed Little Death at the bottle in his hand. "Stop thinking about Mom! Stop!" He fired. The bottle burst and peeled, and red liquor sprayed out. Dad dropped the bottle, stared at it.

"Oh," said Little Death scornfully. "A mortal wound!"

"See!" Billy shouted over her voice. "It's gone! Like Mom! It's the past!"

Dad steadied himself. The right half of his clothes were drenched. He looked at Billy numbly.

"See how good it is," whispered Little Death. "How complete and satisfying. The answer to all your worries. Best you'll ever have."

Dad laughed, a laugh like a moan. He grabbed again.

Billy ran.

He ran hard and fast, until his pounding feet and his gasping breath were the only sounds he heard. Little Death was crazy. Dad was crazy.

Then he sensed Dad running behind him. "Lisa!" Dad called, then "Billy!"

Billy turned, still running, and fired into the air behind him. He didn't check to see if Dad was scared off. He kept running.

He found himself at the back of the farmhouse. He flung open the screen door and ran through the hallways to the front door. He could lose Dad, run to the driveway and down the road. He had to get away from here; it was all crazy. But when he reached the front door he stopped. The door was still open, and the killer bees in the awning were still angry. He saw a dozen of them flying in tight, quick circles beyond the doorway. Breathing hard, Billy looked up at Mom's stained-glass window. The scene showed the farmhouse and barn, with wooded hills behind them; it looked peaceful there in the window. Shadowy bees, colored blue and red and green, tapped against the glass.



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It was too much for him; he couldn't face the bees, not now. He leaned against a wall, shut his eyes, and knelt shaking on the floor.

"Billy?" Little Death said softly. "Billy. Don't hate me."

Billy dropped her. He kicked her across the room. Dad hadn't come in; maybe Billy's wild shot had killed hi ı. Billy folded his arms and lowered his head.

He looked up when Dad came in. Dad was limping, but not bleeding, like he'd fallen hard during the chase. His face looked calm, no tears or laughter.

"Billy!" he said softly. "Billy. Where's the gun?" Then he saw it beside the wall near his feet. He sat down slowly and picked Little Death up.

"No," Billy said. But he couldn't move.

"I'm sorry." Dad's face was blank, like Marc's earlier, except that there was no confusion. "It's been around. It's come around."

He put Little Death's barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

"She only works for me, Dad," Billy said. Now he could move. He got up. "I have to do it." He walked over to Dad and sat beside him. He took Dad's hand and pulled Little Death from Dad's mouth, took her back. She felt warm, but he didn't care anymore.

"We've got to stop," Billy said. "We've got to stop all this. We can't live here anymore. We're going to be new people now, Dad. You and me and Marc. Everything old is gone. Do you hear? Everything old is gone." He lifted Little Death and aimed her upward, at Mom's stained-glass window. "Everything old is *gone*. Gone!"

Billy fired. Little Death's thunder shook the air. The peaceful scene exploded into fragments of sharp-edged color, fragments that sprayed into the room and clinked to the floor all around Billy and Dad. Little Death shivered and made a high-pitched whine; and no shard touched them.

The bees swarmed in.

Billy stared at them, and through the gap, at the scarred old awning wood that housed their nest. They buzzed and careened into the house, bouncing against the walls and ceiling as if ignited by Billy's anguish.

And Dad leaned forward beside Billy, his hands reaching out as if to gather in the pieces of glass. "Oh, Lisa," he moaned. "You took everything else. Why didn't you take *me*?"

Billy lifted Little Death, aimed at the killer bee nest. Nothing would help Dad. Nothing would help Billy. At least I'll hurt these damnfucking *bees*.

But their mad buzzing, the crazed motion of their flight—it all got into Billy's head, mixed with all the scenes of Dad and Marc, and fighting, and Mom's blood in the garage and things bursting and flying apart and



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gone. And it all got too big, and the difference between blasting himself and blasting the buzzing went away.

And he dropped the gun.

Billy tried to pull Dad to his feet, tried to drag him away from the bees. Dad hardly moved, just mumbled something. Billy pulled again, and Dad rose slowly. The bees swirled around them. Billy thought of Little Death again, and he looked to where he'd dropped her.

But Little Death was gone.

"Come back," he cried. But then, all at once, he knew she wouldn't. And he knew that he could never touch a gun again, or even raise his fist, without thinking of her, and the buzzing, and the death. He shoved Dad forward and got him to move toward the kitchen—if they could get behind a door they'd have a chance—and Billy put all the strength of his body into the task. Like a good soldier. But even as he did, he wailed. "I want Little Death. Bring her back. Bring her *back*. . . ."

Her makers did not survive the ripples of the change, spreading out from the past like the disturbance from a stone tossed in water; but their successors greeted her with faces hopeful and sad, in a place much like home, a place of sunlight and glass and the hum of machines. Was the air cleaner by a trace? Were the faces less troubled? She hardly cared. She told them what she knew: the mission was successful. Billy MacAfferty had won a victory against the enemy in the skull. He had not become the man he would have been. The past had changed, and, with it, the future. She did not ask anything more, how long Billy lived, what kind of life he had had, instead of what had once been.

Such things were no longer relevant to her, and her debriefers understood when she asked not to be sent again, to die instead with her timeline. All the weapons chose thus. And the humans prayed that the day would come when the future was safe, and the enemy vanished, when their successors could rest. So they thought as they matched the next weapon to its destination, a girl locked in a broken-plastered basement, long centuries ago. They engaged their machines. They said their goodbyes.

The war went on. ●

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# NEXT ISSUE

Our new 1995 season starts next month, and *that* means the start of another year of State-of-the-Art, top-of-the-line science fiction stories here at *Asimov's*. In recent years, stories from *Asimov's* have won twenty-two Hugo Awards and twenty-one Nebula Awards, as well as World Fantasy Awards, *Locus* Awards, Sturgeon Awards, and *SF Chronicle* Readers' Awards. Its editors have won nine Hugo Awards for Best Editor, and the magazine itself has won the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine in the SF field for an unprecedented six years in a row. This year, *Asimov's* placed seven stories on the Final Hugo Ballot, considerably more than any other short fiction source, and more than twice as many as its closest competitor. *Asimov's* has been called "a truly distinguished magazine, worthy of being set beside such classics of the earlier golden ages as John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction* of 1939-42," and *The Austin Chronicle* has called us "the most consistently innovative and readable SF magazine on the newsstands today."

If you're a longtime reader, you already *know* why. If you're new to the magazine, stick with us through the upcoming year's worth of great stories, and we think that we can *show* you why!

Take, for instance, our next issue, our January issue, which features our usual mix of stories by the Biggest Names in the business *and* by rising new stars....

**Robert Reed** takes us to the Moon, in our compelling cover story, "Waging Good"—a Moon that has fought and won a devestating war against the Earth, a war that has left the battered mother planet in ruins and its inhabitants on the verge of extinction. But the *consequences* of war often come home to roost, even for the victors... and Reed shows us exactly how, in this powerful and intense tale of trust and betrayal, peace and war, love and death, and revenge and renewal.

ALSO IN JANUARY: **Rebecca Ore** returns with a major new novella, taking us back to a medieval English village plagued with a plethora of time travelers, and about to be infested by a more ominous plague, the horrifying Black Death itself, to reveal the funny, sad, compassionate, and cruel history of the competition between "Hypocaust and Bathysphere"; new writer **L. Timmel Duchamp** investigates a plague of a more enigmatic—although ultimately perhaps no less devastating—sort, in the haunting "And I Must Baffle at the Hint"; Nebula and Hugo-winner **Geoffrey A. Landis** slips us a *totally* unauthorized look at a "Long Term Project: Report to the Great Council of Cockroaches"; internationally renowned and critically acclaimed author **Thomas M. Disch** returns with the bittersweet and moving story of "The Invisible Woman"; **Lewis Shiner** evokes one of those classic TV shows everyone remembers—or are *supposed* to, anyway—in the wry "Sitcom"; and new British hard-science writer **Stephen Baxter** takes us across the galaxy to a hostile and almost bewilderingly strange world, for a fast-paced and exciting tale that explores what it really takes to make someone a "Hero." Plus, **Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column, and an array of other columns and features. Look for our January issue on sale on your newsstands on December 6, 1994.

COMING UP IN 1995: Another year of great *Asimov's* stories! TWO major new novellas by **Ursula K. Le Guin,** plus exciting new work by Big Names and popular young professionals such as **John Brunner, Michael Swanwick, Pat Murphy, Charles Sheffield, Brian Stableford, Pamela Sargent, Tanith Lee, Avram Davidson, Maureen F. McHugh, Harry Turtledove, Robert Reed, Esther M. Friesner, Geoffrey A. Landis, Charles L. Harness, Tom Purdom, Kit Reed, Jack McDevitt, Ron Goulart, Don Webb, S.N. Dyer, Lawrence Watt-Evans, Phillip C. Jennings,** and many more. PLUS, the best and brightest of the new young writers, writers who are going to be Names to watch for in the next century, new writers such as **Mary Rosenblum, Nicola Griffith,**

*(Continued on page 105)*

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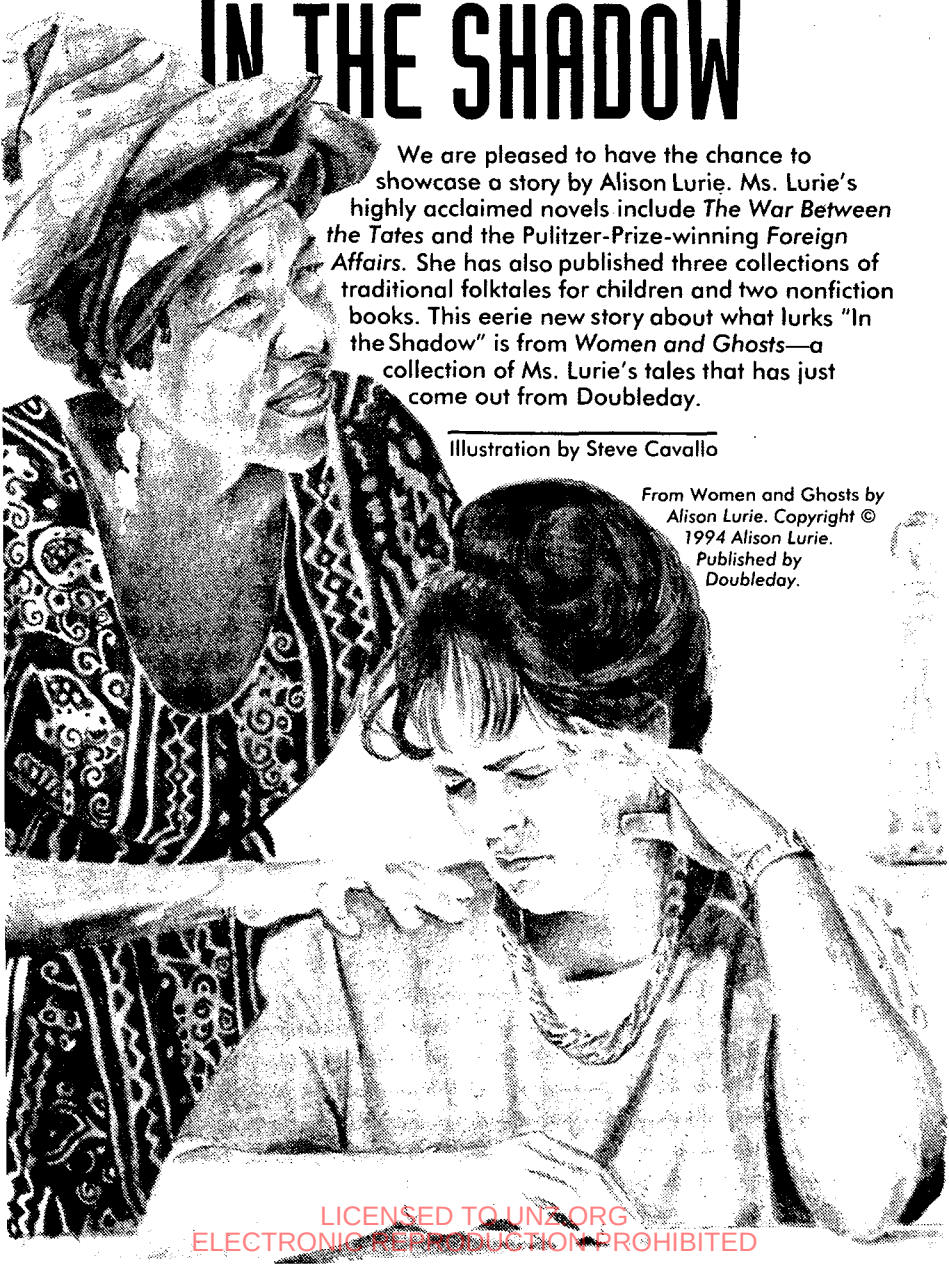
Alison Lurie

# IN THE SHADOW

We are pleased to have the chance to showcase a story by Alison Lurie. Ms. Lurie's highly acclaimed novels include *The War Between the Tates* and the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Foreign Affairs*. She has also published three collections of traditional folktales for children and two nonfiction books. This eerie new story about what lurks "In the Shadow" is from *Women and Ghosts*—a collection of Ms. Lurie's tales that has just come out from Doubleday.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



*From Women and Ghosts by Alison Lurie. Copyright © 1994 Alison Lurie. Published by Doubleday.*

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Celia Zimmern was about the last person she, or anyone else, would have expected to see a ghost. To the other women who worked at the American Embassy in London that year, she seemed almost unnaturally cool and rational. Nothing ever rattled her, or—as far as they could observe—deeply excited her.

Celia didn't even seem excited by her undoubted effect on men—which she should have been, they thought, because there was really no explanation for it. She wasn't beautiful, only rather pretty: slight, small, with a halo of crinkly dark-oak hair and oak-brown eyes with lashes so long and dense that some thought them false. Her manner wasn't flirtatious or seductive, and she always dressed quietly. Most people didn't realize that Celia's fawn wool suit was a thrift-shop Chanel, and her navy crepe a Jean Muir; they only noticed that she wore the same clothes over and over again.

For Celia, such monotony was preferable to its alternative. If she had a failing, she knew, it was that she wanted the best or nothing. Unfortunately, the best is usually expensive, and as a result not only Celia's closet but her tiny elegant flat in Knightsbridge was almost empty. She would rather shiver all day than wear a cheap synthetic sweater, rather sit on an Afghan cushion or even her beautifully waxed parquet floor than in a plastic sling chair. Her acquisitiveness expressed itself so fastidiously that most of the time it seemed more like asceticism. But anyone who had watched Celia in a shop, stroking the surface of a beige suede skirt or lifting a perfect peach from green tissue paper, would have known otherwise.

Celia made no public show of her good taste—or of any other preference. On the job, especially, she maintained a very low profile; she took in information rather than giving it out. She'd never understood why most people strove to repeat facts and anecdotes and opinions they already knew. Whereas by listening carefully one might hear something interesting, even something that would turn out to be useful.

Because Celia's manner was so low-key, members of the public tended to assume that she was employed at the Embassy in some low-grade clerical capacity. In fact she was a career diplomat with a responsible position in the Information Section. Her attitude at work was one of polite attention to the matter at hand; but underneath this was an almost formidable administrative intelligence and decisiveness.

Though a few of Celia's female colleagues considered her somewhat poor in spirit as well as in wardrobe, most liked and even admired her. From their point of view her only fault was that she attracted too many men, and that she continued to go out with ones in whom she had no serious interest, constantly accompanying them to restaurants, concerts, theaters, and films. She was nearly thirty, they said to each other; why


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couldn't she settle on one guy and give somebody else a chance? It wasn't fair. "I don't even believe she sleeps with most of them," one irritable young woman from the Visa Office asserted, calling Celia "a bitch in the manger."

Celia herself was modest and a little cynical about her social success. She knew it was mostly her gift as a listener that attracted and held men, just as it soothed irritated officials and calmed impatient journalists. Somehow, she had the ability to focus her entire attention on whomever she was with, letting them speak at length without intruding any personal opinions. "That's very interesting," she would say if the monologue faltered. "Tell me more," or "Really! I never knew that."

What still rather surprised her was that none of the men she knew ever caught on. They took her ready responsiveness for granted, as they would that of a superior computer system. Indeed, she sometimes privately compared herself to those computer programs that can imitate psychotherapy and even produce a transference. A similar transference usually appeared in any man Celia went out with more than once or twice: a feeling of love and trust, and the conviction that she was deeply sympathetic with all his views. So strong was this conviction that often, even when Celia declined to put out, they wanted to continue seeing her, to engross her attention for life.

Celia was aware that her acquaintances wished she would settle on one guy, and also that she was twenty-nine. Even from the point of her career, marriage would be advisable. In this connection, her mind turned most often to an economist named Dwayne Mudd. He was a large handsome young man among whose many assets were good manners, sexual energy, professional competence, and a declared wish to have children. When she admitted to her friends that Dwayne was talking of marriage, they told her she could hardly do better. He was perfect, they said.

It was true, Celia admitted to herself, that Dwayne Mudd was a Rhodes scholar, a member of a well-known Midwestern political family, a former college track star, a *magna cum laude* graduate of Dartmouth, and an alumnus of Yale Law School, with what was probably a brilliant career ahead of him. Why was it, then, that when she imagined being married to him her strongest feeling was one of restless depression? Was it just his ridiculous name?

Or did it have something to do with the fact that Dwayne seemed to assume Celia was fortunate to be courted by him? When he told her that she was really very pretty, or that she would make an ideal diplomat's or politician's wife, she somehow felt he was giving himself a pep talk. He was excusing himself for not having chosen someone richer and more beautiful; above all, someone from another prominent Midwestern family, because as he had once remarked, in politics it's a big advantage to have a wife with good connections.


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When Celia told Dwayne that she didn't think she would ever want to marry him, he didn't seem to hear her. "You can't mean that seriously, darling," he said. Even though she repeated it, he insisted on treating her reluctance as feminine coquettishness. "You'll come round," he said, smiling. "I can wait."

But Celia, though she told herself that she could hardly do better, was more and more determined not to come round. Privately, she had begun to refer to Dwayne as the Wombat; not only because of his admiration for Australia, where he had spent his last posting, but because of his cropped furry hair, broad and somewhat furry hands, solid build, and stubborn tenacity.

Usually Celia kept her growing annoyance with Dwayne to herself, but occasionally it slipped out. Once, for instance, he called her office four times in a single day, mainly to say that he was thinking of her and of what he referred to as "last night."

"He must love you very much," said her boss's secretary, Crystal, who was softly pretty and romantically inclined.

"Dwayne Mudd is a sentimentalist," replied Celia. "He probably read somewhere that women like this sort of constant nuisance and interruption."

A few days later, a cornucopia of sugar-pink rosebuds appeared on her desk at lunchtime.

"Oh, how lovely!" Crystal exclaimed.

"Well. Maybe," Celia said. "What I think is, if you're going to buy flowers, you should go to a flower shop. Anything you find on those stalls outside the underground is going to be dead before you get it home." She held the crumpled paper cone out horizontally, so that the weak stems, studded with knots of crumpled, rusting pink silk, drooped downward.

"But it's the thought that counts, isn't it?" Crystal asked.

Celia, who disagreed, did not contradict her. "You know what they always remind me of, flowers like these? Those shoddy cut-price umbrellas they sell in the same place, outside the Bond Street station. They never open right either, and quite soon they collapse completely."

"They're kind of sweet now, though, you know."

Crystal looked at the roses in a way that caused Celia to ask, "Would you like them?"

"Oh, yes! Thank you." Crystal raised the paper cornucopia to her lace-trimmed blouse and buried her nose in the faint fragrance.

"I guess Dwayne still wants to marry you," she said finally, exhaling.

"Yes." Celia gave a little apologetic laugh. "Of course that's impossible. I couldn't marry a man whose name was Dwayne Mudd. Imagine what it would mean—a lifetime of bad jokes."


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"You could keep your own last name. Lots of girls do that now," Crystal suggested.

"You'd still be married to him, and have to hear the jokes," said Celia. "Just for instance, Dwayne told me once that in elementary school he was known as 'Muddy Drain.' "

Crystal giggled. "But he must believe he still has a chance," she said. "After all, you keep seeing him. And you still have his mother's gold watch."

"Yes," Celia admitted. She lifted her slim hand, admiring again an exquisite bracelet watch made in the nineteen thirties by Cartier, with a woven gold mesh band and a tiny oblong dial elegantly engraved with Roman numerals. "But it's only a loan, you know. I've promised to return it the moment Dwayne finds someone else to marry."

"He'll never find anyone as long as you go on encouraging him," Crystal predicted.

"I don't encourage him," Celia protested mildly.

"You must, or he wouldn't still be hanging around. He'd find another girlfriend. I think really maybe you should give back his watch, and tell him you don't want to see him anymore." Crystal's voice shook slightly.

"But I do want to see Dwayne," Celia said, smiling, not offended —indeed, Crystal had never seen her offended. "He's quite pleasant to be with, and he knows a great deal about international economics and the Common Market. I just don't want to marry him. He realizes that."

"I don't think he does," said Crystal, who already had the difficult last name of Freeplatzer and felt she could reconcile herself to a lifetime of bad jokes quite easily if it should become Mudd. "But I suppose he'll figure it out in time."

Either Crystal was wrong, or Dwayne Mudd didn't have enough time. He was still stubbornly pursuing Celia when two months later, driving home from a party in what was later determined to be a condition of .12 blood-alcohol content, he turned the wrong way up a one-way street in Belgravia and collided fatally with a heavy lorry.

Celia, in the opinion of some, didn't take this news as hard as she might have—as she should have, one of them said at lunch in the canteen.

"I don't see that," protested Crystal loyally. "I know Celia was really, really shocked by what happened to Dwayne."

"Well, we all were. I'm not claiming she doesn't feel as bad as we do. But she ought to feel worse. After all, she was going out with him."

"Yes, but she's been going out with a lot of other men too, you know. Three at least."

Crystal's friends nodded. Oh, they knew that, they said crossly.



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"I don't see how she can just go on as if nothing had happened," one complained. "As if she didn't really care."

Celia does too care, Crystal thought. She's still wearing Dwayne Mudd's mother's gold watch; doesn't that prove it?

It was true that Celia was wearing the watch. After Dwayne died she'd asked herself if perhaps she should return it—but to whom? Dwayne had no brothers or sisters; she'd have to ask someone at the embassy who his legal heirs were, which meant appearing in the embarrassing and false public role of grieving girlfriend. Possibly Dwayne had some cousin who would want the watch, but that wasn't likely. Most people—especially people in Iowa, was the thought that crossed Celia's mind, though she quickly suppressed it as snobbish—wouldn't appreciate Dwayne's mother's watch. They'd think it old-fashioned and inconvenient; they'd much prefer the latest glittery Rolex that never had to be wound and would tell them the day of the month and the time in Hong Kong. And anyhow, wouldn't Dwayne have wanted her to have it, if he'd known—?

A month later, as if the Fates had finally harkened to Crystal's friends, Celia abruptly removed herself from competition: not by accepting another of her current beaus, but by requesting and receiving a job transfer. What amazed everyone was her destination: a small hot West African country of no political importance.

"Of course it's a fairly responsible position: Cultural Affairs Officer," a secretary in the department involved reported to her friends later in the canteen. "And the salary is good, because it's a hardship post."

"But gee, really: Goto," Crystal exclaimed.

"I know. Nobody's ever heard of it. My boss told Celia that if she'd just hang on awhile he could probably find her something much better. But Celia said she wanted to leave as soon as possible. I don't get it."

"Maybe it's because of Dwayne Mudd," suggested another young woman. "Maybe she can't forget him as long as she's here in London. She might feel guilty, even."

"I don't know," Crystal said. "Guilty doesn't exactly sound like her."

All the same, she thought later, there was definitely something on Celia's mind. She had a new distracted manner, a kind of preoccupation—Could she have realized that she'd been in love with Dwayne after all?

"I think I can guess why you asked for a transfer," Crystal said when Celia took her for a farewell lunch at Wheeler's. "It was because of Dwayne Mudd."

Celia started as if she'd taken hold of a defective electrical appliance.



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"How did you know?" she half-whispered, looking round the restaurant as if it were full of undercover agents. "I mean, what makes you say that?" she amended, recovering her cool.

"It's—well, the way you've been sort of tense ever since he died," Crystal said. "I figured you might still be thinking about Dwayne, and kind of, you know, imagining him everywhere in London."

"Yes," Celia said after a considerable pause. She lowered her fork, speared a slice of cucumber, raised it. "Not everywhere," she added, addressing the cucumber. "I only see him at certain times. . . . Whenever I'm, you know, with somebody else."

"You mean, in your mind's eye," Crystal said, stirring her salad for concealed bits of shrimp.

"What?" Celia lowered the fork again.

"I mean you don't, like, really see Dwayne? Not like a spirit apparition." Crystal leaned forward, her mouth half open.

"Oh, no; of course not," Celia lied. She was reminded that Crystal, though reasonably discreet, was the daughter of small-town spiritualists and had a residual fascination with their beliefs.

The truth was, though, that Celia was seeing Dwayne Mudd, or something that looked a lot like him. Mostly he appeared as a sort of wavery grey semitransparent image printed on the scene like a weak photocopy when the operator's forgotten to change the toner. He wasn't there all the time, only very occasionally—only, she realized after the first week, when she was alone with a man.

The first time Celia saw Dwayne she was in a taxi with a handsome, slightly stupid young merchant banker. As he bent and kissed her, she imagined or perceived something like Dwayne Mudd sitting on the jump seat. She sat up abruptly, and it vanished.

It was dusk, and raining, and Celia attributed the illusion to a trick of the wet half-light. But she couldn't really get into it again with the merchant banker, and when they reached her flat in Knightsbridge she checked her little gold watch, exclaimed at the lateness of the hour, and didn't ask him in.

The next time Dwayne Mudd appeared was worse, because it was daylight. Celia was on a Sunday outing with an American legal expert called Clark. They were sitting in a little wood at the top of Hampstead Heath, looking out through a stand of ancient beeches at a Constable landscape of towering cumulus clouds and descending fields of grass and flowers. Celia had just had a first-rate lunch and learnt several useful things about libel law; she felt pleased, at peace.

But when Clark put his arm around her and stroked her bare shoulder the grey shadow of the Wombat wavered into view beneath the branches



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of a nearby tree. This time what she saw was difficult to explain as a trick of the light: it was clearly the two-dimensional image of a man; not grey now, but weakly colored like a tinted black-and-white photograph.

"What is it?" Clark asked, following her start and fixed stare.

"I heard thunder," Celia said, improvising. "We'd better get back, we'll be drenched."

When Clark, clearly much disappointed and even cross, had returned Celia to her flat and not been invited in, she poured herself a vodka and grapefruit juice and sat down to face the situation.

She refused to consider Crystal's idea that what she had seen was a "spirit apparition," i.e., a ghost. Not only did ghosts not exist, the very idea of them was in bad taste; it went with woozy New Age music, the fingering of greasy tarot cards, and the search for people's former incarnations, who somehow always turned out to be upscale or celebrity personages.

No, there was no ghost, Celia said to herself. Rather, for some reason, she was psychologically haunted by the death of Dwayne Mudd, about which she consciously felt only a mild sadness, and also—for Dwayne had become quite a nuisance in the final month or so—a little relief.

But, Celia thought, there must be more going on subconsciously. I must believe that if I'd agreed to marry Dwayne he wouldn't be dead. Some irrational, infantile part of me must think that if I'd gone to that stuffy dinner party with him he wouldn't have drunk too much, and there wouldn't have been an accident. That's what he would probably want me to think if he were alive.

Don't be Silly, she told herself sharply, capitalizing the adjective, which had been her nickname as a small child—perhaps on the principle of opposites, for if there was anything Celia hadn't been for a long while, it was silly. That's total nonsense about Dwayne, it's just what something neurotic in you imagines. Maybe you ought to see a shrink.

But almost as rapidly as this idea came to Celia she rejected it. She couldn't afford private therapy; she'd have to go through the embassy medical plan. And when anyone did that it got into their medical records and stayed there. Of course no one was supposed to know what was in the records; but people often did know, because someone had to file them.

And when you came up for promotion, it usually came out. Then, even if there'd only been a minor problem, insomnia, for instance, or fear of flying, it could hurt your career. And hers wasn't a minor problem: she was having what a shrink would call delusions. Possibly she was actually coming down with a full-blown psychosis.

Celia, who up to now had always taken her mental stability for granted, began to feel depressed and even frightened. But she was a young woman of considerable courage and determination. The only thing


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to do, she finally decided, was to ignore her hallucinations and assume they would eventually go away.

An opportunity to test this theory appeared the following weekend. Celia was at home, making lunch for a former lover from America, a painter named Nat. She knew, and he knew, that this lunch would probably end in bed, for old times' sake. But as she was adding fresh cream to the vichyssoise, Nat came up close behind and embraced her; and there was the greyish shape of Dwayne Mudd again, sliding about on the sunlit wall among the shadows of the hanging Swedish ivy. As Nat caressed her right breast the shape seemed to grow darker.

"No," she said aloud.

"Sorry, love," Nat grinned. "Okay, I'll leave you alone while you cook."

The shadow wavered, faded. But it reappeared after lunch as Celia stood to clear the table.

"I've missed you," Nat said, standing also, looking directly at her.

"Yes." They moved toward each other and then, entwined, toward the bedroom. Dwayne's image followed them from room to room, sliding over the walls and furniture.

As they sank down on the bed, Celia deliberately shut her eyes. "You want to watch, Wombat, go ahead," she told him silently in her mind, where of course he was located.

As if she had spoken, a voice—Dwayne Mudd's voice, though flatter now, deadpan—in fact, dead—replied. —That's a filthy person you're with, it said. —Literally. He hasn't had a shower since Thursday.

Celia, with considerable effort, did not look round or even open her eyes. It was clear that Nat had heard nothing, for he went on kissing her enthusiastically. She cooperated, holding him close, although now his light-brown hair had an—imagined? —odor of stale turpentine.

—You like dirt and paint, look at his hands, Dwayne Mudd's voice said. —And wait till you smell how long he's been wearing those socks.

You're lying, Celia thought, but in spite of herself she glanced at Nat's hand as it lifted her grey silk Nicole Farhi jersey. There was a sour-green smudge across the knuckles, and the square-cut nails were black. And when, in spite of her resolution, she raised her eyes, there was the shadow of Dwayne Mudd in the desk chair. Irrationally, because he was merely a figment of her imagination, she felt deeply embarrassed that he, fully clothed, should see her lying there naked.

The event that followed, though clearly great fun for Nat, was unsatisfactory to Celia. She concentrated on keeping her eyes shut, but she couldn't help hearing the voice.

—Well, look at that. He still doesn't wear underpants. Kind of disgusting, isn't it? Dwayne said, while Nat gasped and cried out, "Oh, love!"


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—And get a whiff of those armpits. That was why you broke up with him, wasn't it?

"Celia, my darling," Nat murmured, subsiding, then turning to look at her. "Are you all right?" he asked. "I mean, is something the matter? You didn't— You usually—"

"I'm fine," Celia assured him. "That was lovely. But I think. . . . Well, the thing is," she continued, "I'm rather involved with someone else just now."

"Really? Oh, hell," Nat said.

That was how it began; and it rapidly became worse. Soon, whenever Celia even shook hands with a man, the wavering image of Dwayne Mudd appeared and spoke. In life the Wombat's language had been decorous; now it was coarse.

—He's got zits on his ass.

—Notice how he stinks of stale smoke, from his lousy nicotine habit. Shit, you can smell it, you're close enough.

—How can you stand that mustache, so red and bristly, like a hog I knew in Iowa. Got a face like a goddamn hog, too, hasn't he?

—I suppose you know he's fucking the wife of the MP from that place in Surrey where he lives.

This last remark was directed at the merchant banker, whom Celia had been spending most of the time with lately—not because she liked him best but because he was the most imperceptive of her suitors and thus least apt to notice her distracted condition. But after she'd made discreet inquiries and discovered that Dwayne was right about the MP's wife, she crossed the banker off her list. Someone must have mentioned the affair and I must have remembered it subconsciously, she told herself. But she wasn't sure; she wasn't sure of anything anymore.

I'm falling apart, Celia thought. I've got to get out of London before I completely crack up. No, out of England.

When she first heard of Goto, Celia had seen in her mind a comic-book panorama of jungle and swamp, crocodiles, giant snakes, political violence, and malarial heat. But in fact it wasn't bad. Though she arrived in July the temperature was tolerable. The heavy rains had passed, and the landscape was densely green, layered like an Henri Rousseau painting with palms and banana trees and tall grasses studded with red and magenta and white flowers. The atmosphere at the embassy was agreeable and relaxed, and there was an Olympic-size outdoor pool embraced by blossoming shrubs.

Popti, the capital, turned out to be a seaside city of broad boulevards and red sandy alleys; of low blonde and ocher and terra-cotta houses and


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shops, with here and there a shimmering high-rise hotel or bank. For years it had been a French colony; French was still the official language, and there were visible survivals of French cuisine and French fashion.

There might be advantages in a place like this, Celia realized. She could practice her French, and develop some regional expertise. Moreover, her professional situation was greatly improved; she had an office of her own, a secretary, and the occasional use of an embassy car and driver. She also had authority; she could cause events to happen. In just a month she'd started two film series; she was reorganizing the library and negotiating with USIS in Washington for interesting speakers.

What's more, she had been assigned a four-bedroom air-conditioned villa with cook, cleaner, part-time gardener, and twenty-four-hour guard service. It was not far from the embassy, and next door to the home and shop of the city's most fashionable dressmaker, Madame Miri (to some of her European clients, Madame Marie).

Celia's own house was usually quiet except for the faint, almost domestic hum of the radio that would communicate instantly with the Marine guard station at the embassy in case of emergency. But there was always something going on in Madame's deep, leafy compound, which besides the shop contained five buildings and a large and shifting population of relatives and employees, from infants in cotton hip slings to toothless grandmothers. Celia was becoming quite friendly with Madame, who like herself was a perfectionist where dress was concerned; she had already copied a complex Issey Miyake for Celia in a remarkable black-and-indigo-grey local batik.

Most restful of all, Celia hadn't seen Dwayne Mudd since she arrived. That proved nothing, though, for as yet she had touched no man except to shake hands. Now that she had her life organized, she knew, it was time to test her safety—her sanity, really. Because what was the alternative? The alternative was a possibly lifelong nervous celibacy.

As a sympathetic listener, Celia had not only rapidly become popular in the European community, she had acquired two admirers. She decided to go out with the one she liked least, an Oklahoma businessman—probably married, she guessed, though he claimed not—called Gary Mumpson. She therefore allowed Gary to take her to the most expensive French restaurant and, after dinner, to drive to the beach and park. It was pitch dark there, under a sky of intense tropical blackness speckled with stars. As Gary leant over to kiss her, rather sweatily, Celia held her breath. For a moment nothing happened; then, mixed with the sound of the heavy, treacherous surf, she seemed to discern an unmistakable voice.

—Yeah, give the creep a big hug, it said, so you can feel that rubber tire.



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You're imagining things, Celia told herself; but her arms were already around Gary and she could not help following the Wombat's instructions.

—Anyhow, you're wasting your time, the voice seemed to say. —Not only is he married, his cock is only three inches long.

No, it was no use. "Come on, let's drive back," Celia said miserably, struggling upright.

"Nah, what for— Oh, sure. Great idea!" Gary panted, imagining (mistakenly) that this was an invitation to Celia's apartment.

The next day was Saturday. Celia, after a sleepless night, left her house in the hope of jogging off some of her depression. The morning was cool and fresh, the street nearly empty, but as she reached the gate of the compound next door she was greeted by Madame Miri.

In the strong sunlight her landlady was an imposing figure. Her skin shone like polished mahogany, and she wore a brilliant ballooning orange robe and turban printed with blue birds of paradise.

"What is it, *chérie?*" she inquired in her excellent French, putting a broad vermilion-nailed hand on Celia's arm.

"What?" Celia said stupidly, "What is what?"

"You are troubled this morning."

"No, not at all." Celia tried to make her voice light and unconcerned.

Madame shook her head. "I see it, in the air around you. Please, come into the shop." She lifted a hanging curtain printed with giant golden flowers.

Blurrily, Celia followed. Madame Miri indicated that she should seat herself beside the big cutting table heaped with fashion magazines and bolts of multicolored cloth, and brought her a cup of scalding French coffee.

"You don't sleep well last night," Madame Miri stated rather than inquired.

"Not very well, no," Celia admitted.

"You have the nightmare, perhaps?"

"Well, yes, sometimes," said Celia, thinking that the appearances of Dwayne Mudd were a kind of nightmare.

"I shall give you something." Madame Miri rose and swept through another curtain at the dim back of the room, where she seemed to be opening drawers and unscrewing bottles, murmuring to herself in a singsong.

I'm not going to swallow any strange medicine, Celia promised herself.

*"Voilà."* Returning, Madame laid before Celia a small bag of reddish homespun tied with a strip of leather.

"Take this, *chérie*. You don't open it, but tonight you put it under your pillow, yes?"



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"All right," Celia promised, relieved. She knew or could guess what was in the bag: a selection of the magical and medicinal herbs and bits of bone sold at stalls in the village markets and even here in the capital. It was what people called a *gris-gris*—a protective charm.

"It's good," Madame urged, smiling, holding out the little bag. "Good against fear."

Of course Madame Miri believes in spirits, she thought; almost everyone does here. The principal religion of Goto, after all, was animism: the worship of ancestors and of certain trees, rivers, and mountains. Ghosts and demons inhabited the landscape, and the fields and groves often displayed, instead of a scarecrow, a bundle of leaves and powders and bones given power by spells and hung from a branch or wedged into the fork of a tree. According to local belief, it protected the crops not only against birds and animals but against thieves and evil spirits.

"Thank you," Celia said.

When she could Celia kept her promises. She therefore put the *gris-gris* under her pillow that night, and because of it or not, slept more easily the rest of the week. Somewhat revived in spirits, she decided to risk going out with the second of her current admirers, the Marine master sergeant in charge of the guard at the embassy. Jackson was an amusing young Southerner of considerable native wit who looked well in his uniform and magnificent in swim trunks. On the down side, he was four years younger than Celia, badly educated, and had terrible political convictions.

This did not surprise Celia: in her opinion, many people had peculiar views. But however much she might disagree, she made no attempt to protest or correct them. She'd always disliked argument, which in her experience never convinced anyone—only facts did that, and even then not very often. Whenever she seriously disagreed with someone she repeated a phrase her father had taught her when she was fourteen: "You may be right." ("It took me fifty-five years to learn to say that," he had told her. "Maybe it'll save you a little trouble.")

At the last moment before Jackson arrived in his red Corvette, Celia, with a superstitious impulse of which she was rather ashamed, placed Madame Miri's *gris-gris* in the bottom of her handbag. But when her date handed—or, more accurately, handled—her into the car, she thought for a moment that she saw Dwayne's image, wavering but distinct, on the whitewashed wall of the compound. It was transformed almost at once into the blowing shadows of a banyan tree, and Celia scolded herself for succumbing to nerves.

Unlike Gary, Jackson did not wait to make his move till after supper. As soon as they pulled up in front of the open-air restaurant, from which


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noisy, thumping local music was soaking, he turned toward Celia. "Hey, you really look super tonight," he said, grabbing her expertly.

Dwayne Mudd reappeared at once, sitting on the hood of the Corvette: strangely grey and semitransparent against the sun-flooded tropical shrubbery, as if the light that shone on him was still the humid grey light of London—but unmistakable. —You better watch your step with this one, he announced.

"Oh, shut up," Celia said silently. "I've come all this way; I'm going to enjoy myself if I feel like it."

—He goes with whores, Dwayne continued relentlessly, pressing his grey face up against the windshield. —You should find out when he was last tested for AIDS. And check if he has a cut on his lip.

Involuntarily, Celia ran the tip of her tongue over Jackson's wide mouth. Mistaking her intention, he gasped and pulled her closer, murmuring, "Oh, baby."

That night, oppressed by both anxiety and frustrated desire, Celia slept worse than ever—as was immediately apparent to Madame Miri when she appeared next morning.

"But it is not yet well, *ma petite,*" she announced, after lowering herself into a chair and accepting coffee.

"No," Celia admitted. "I guess your charm doesn't work on Europeans." She laughed nervously.

Madame ignored this. "There is something heavy on your mind, is it not so?" she asked.

"No— Well, yes." Giving in, Celia told Madame Miri, gradually, everything. She'll know I'm insane now, she thought as the grotesque words fell from her mouth like the toads and snakes of the old fairy tale. She'll tell me to see a doctor.

"My poor child," Madame said instead, when Celia fell nervously silent. "I see how it is. This individual, he is jealous. Since he cannot have you, he wants to keep all other men away. That I have seen before, *eh oui.*" She sighed. "And so for nothing you made this long journey." For the first time, she used the intimate second person singular. "Though perhaps not for nothing," she added almost to herself.

"I thought, if I was so far from London—"

*"Chérie,* two, three thousand miles, they are like this" (she snapped her fingers) "to a spirit. They don't figure space like we do."

"A spirit?" Celia echoed.

*"Exactement."* Madame Miri smiled, and Celia remembered a verse from a tribal chant that had been recited to her by the Deputy Chief of Mission, a former anthropologist:


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Those who are dead have not gone.
They are in the shadow that brightens,
They are in the shadow that fades,
They are in the shadow that trembles.

"And how was he called in life, this *personnage?*" Madame asked.

"Dwayne Mudd," Celia said.

Madame frowned. "Mudd. *C'est la boue, n'est-ce pas?*"

"Yes, I suppose so," Celia admitted.

"A bad name. Ill-omened."

"Evidently," Celia said. She tried an uneasy laugh, but Madame ignored the pathetic result.

"It takes a spirit to catch a spirit," she said in a low voice, leaning across the table toward Celia as if Dwayne Mudd might be listening. "You know perhaps some very powerful woman gone over to the other side, your mother, your grandmother *peut-être?*"

Celia shook her head. "No, I'm sorry. They're both still alive. And my other grandmother, my father's mother—I don't know. I never liked her much, and I don't think she liked me either." She looked up at Madame Miri, who was still waiting patiently, and then down into the dark reflections of her coffee cup.

"There is someone," she said after a pause. "I never knew her, but I'm named after her. She was my father's stepmother."

*"Une belle-mère, mais sympathique."*

"Oh yes, so my father claims. He never uses the word wonderful about anyone or anything, but he said once that she was a wonderful woman—I'm supposed to be like her, even though we weren't related."

"That's well. Perhaps you have her soul."

"Maybe," Celia said, recalling that according to local belief ancestral spirits returned after death to inhabit their newborn descendants.

*"En tout cas,* she's without doubt watching over you, or you would not have thought of her now." Madame Miri smiled.

"I'm not so sure about that," Celia said. "I mean, if she is, I guess she hasn't been watching very often, or I wouldn't be in this fix now."

*"Pas certain, chèrie.* This *belle-mère,* she was perhaps a very polite lady?"

"What?" Celia asked, feeling disoriented. Lack of sleep, she thought. "Oh, yes. My father said she had perfect manners."

"That explains it. She's watching over you, *oui,* but when you and some type are becoming close" (Madame made a somewhat obscene gesture) *"elle est bien élevée,* she averts her eyes. And, *tu me l'as raconté,* that's the only time this evil spirit appears."


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"Yes," Celia agreed. Am I really having this conversation? she thought.

"Very well. I tell you, this is what you do. Next time you see him, you call for *la belle-mère*. Not necessary to shout her name out loud, just whisper in your mind, *'Venez, venez à moi, aidez-moi.'* "

"All right," Celia promised.

For a few minutes after Madame Miri had left, she felt better. Perhaps she wasn't mad after all, only haunted. In Goto the existence of supernatural beings did not seem so impossible. Out in the country, almost every village was guarded by one or more fetish figures, which resembled large grey stone fire hydrants hung with colored rags and garlands of flowers. They had broad faces, staring eyes, and huge sexual organs, and gave off, even to a skeptic like Celia, an ominous and powerful aura.

Even here in the capital, the totemic animal of the dominant local tribe, the pigeon, was honored by a monumental sculpture of a huge white bird, described in tourist brochures as the "Pigeon of Peace." Closer at hand, in a shadowy corner of Madame Miri's courtyard, squatted two household gods, smaller versions of the village fetish figures. They wore bright, constantly renewed garlands of red and orange flowers, and each day Madame's cook fed them: their open stone mouths were always smeared with dried blood and rice and fruit pulp.

But Celia's euphoria lasted only briefly. She realized that if she began to take all this seriously she would be mentally worse off than before: not only having delusions, but starting to believe in ghosts, and thinking that she could exorcise them by invoking the name of an ancestor whom she had never met and who wasn't even an ancestor. Going native, in fact, she thought. She had already heard stories about people, anthropologists mostly, who began by taking the local belief system too seriously and ended up partly or wholly off their rockers.

Some of these tales, and most of the information about Gotolese superstition, had come from a man in whom Celia was becoming seriously interested: the Deputy Chief of Mission himself, a young career diplomat and former anthropologist named Charles Fenn. He was a tall, thin, very intelligent, slightly odd-looking man about forty, with a long face, skewed eyebrows, a beaky nose, and a satirical, melancholy manner. She had liked him from the start, without ever thinking of him as a possible beau. But then, everyone at the embassy liked Charles, from the ambassador (a fat, elderly Texan magnate whose contributions to the Republican party had earned him this honorary post) down to the twelve-year-old Gotolese undergardener.

According to embassy gossip, melancholy was not Charles's normal


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mood, but the result of events beyond his control. He was recently separated and in the process of being divorced: his ex-wife, everyone said, had been a cute and even lovable airhead, but terminally indiscreet and totally unable to adjust to West Africa. Since she left, Charles had been under the weather emotionally, while remaining unvaryingly hardworking and sympathetic to his staff. "He really listens to you," people often said.

"Yes, I know," Celia always replied, feeling mildly uneasy, because this was what people often said about her.

Her unease escalated to panic at her next one-to-one meeting with Charles, after her skilled attentiveness had drawn him into describing his years as an anthropologist.

"It's a very cluttered field," he was telling her. "In more ways than one. You know what they say about the Navaho, that the typical family consists of a grandparent, the parents, 3.2 children, and an anthropologist. It was almost like that where I was. I realized I wasn't only going to be unnecessary and ineffectual, I was going to be superfluous."

"Tell me more," Celia murmured encouragingly as he paused and gazed out the window into the glossy green crown of an embassy avocado tree.

Charles turned and looked at her. "You always say that, don't you?" he remarked with what struck Celia as a dangerous casualness. " 'Tell me more.' "

"No—well, not always," she stammered.

Charles smiled. "Or else you say, 'That's really interesting.' Persuading the other person to go on talking so you'll get to know them, and they won't know you. I recognize the technique, you see, because I do it too."

"I don't . . . " Celia began, and swallowed the rest of the fib.

"But now I think it's your turn. *You* tell *me* more." He did not take his eyes off her. They were a strange color, she saw, between dark gold and green.

"More about what?"

"I don't care. Your childhood, your opinions, your ambitions, your dreams, whatever you like. As long as it's the truth, of course." Charles smiled.

"I—uh." Celia hesitated; her heart seemed to flop in her chest like a fish.

"I know. Tell me about your time in the Peace Corps, what you liked most about that." He glanced at the wall clock. "You have ten minutes, all right?"

"All right," Celia said. She swallowed. "I think it was the way the



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villages looked at night," she was surprised to hear herself say. "Especially when there was a moon . . . " Why did I agree? she asked herself. Why didn't I just laugh it off and say Not today or I don't feel like it? I could still say that. But instead she heard her voice going on, beginning to speak of things she'd not told anyone, not because they were private or shocking, but because nobody had ever really listened, they were all just waiting their turn to talk—

It's the way he looks at me, she thought, glancing at Charles. He knows I'm here. Is that how I make people feel?

"That's very interesting," Charles said as she paused, glancing at the clock and then back at Celia. "Go on."

"Well. It's because, you see, the desert isn't quiet at night. There are all the sounds in the trees and scrub outside the village, rustlings and squeaks and sighs, and you're there, you're part of it . . . you feel . . . " She looked at Charles Fenn. He was still listening; he heard her, every word. This could be important, she thought. It is important.

She thought it again after she left Charles's office, and that evening back home. She told herself that Charles was a most unusual man. That without his flighty wife he would probably go far; with Celia, even farther—if she were ever her normal self again. Otherwise she would simply screw up his career, not to mention her own, she thought wretchedly. Then she reminded herself that there was no reason to worry about this, because nothing Charles had yet done or said suggested he wanted to go anywhere with her. But for some reason that made Celia feel even more miserable.

Things were still in this condition when Charles asked Celia to accompany him and another staff member to a reception at the French Embassy. The commercial attaché was in the front seat with the driver; Charles and Celia in the back, and as they drove through streets illuminated by the mauve and vermilion afterglow of a tropical sunset Charles described the rank, history, and personal peculiarities of the people she was about to meet.

"There's a lot of rather odd characters in the local diplomatic corps, I'm afraid," he concluded. "But I hope you're going to like it here all the same." The car lurched suddenly round a corner, flinging Celia, in her gossamer-light pale-mauve muslim dress, abruptly against him.

"Thanks, I think I will," she replied distractedly, trying to catch her breath, not moving away.

"I'm very glad to hear that." Charles also did not move; under the cover of the attaché case on his lap, he put his hand on hers.

—You're making another mistake, said the flat dead voice of Dwayne Mudd. At first Celia could not see him; then she realized he was sitting, grey and squeezed up, between Charles and the door.



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—You think he's so fucking great. He's got—

I don't want to hear it, Celia thought desperately, feeling the steady, disturbing, desirable pressure of Charles's shoulder, arm, and hand against hers.

—athlete's foot, and—

Remembering Madame Miri, she cried out silently and desperately in her mind to the other Celia Zimmern. *Venez à moi, aidez-moi!* How stupid it sounded: like calling on herself.

Miraculously, the horrible flat voice ceased. My God, it worked, Celia thought. But the shadow of Dwayne Mudd did not vanish: it remained in the car, silently moving its greyish lips, until they reached the French Embassy.

"So, how does it go?" Madame Miri asked next morning, waylaying Celia as she went out for an early run. Narrowing her eyes in the brilliant sun, she added, "Perhaps not completely well, yes?"

"He's still there," Celia admitted. "I can't hear him anymore, but he's there, trying to speak, opening and shutting his mouth. Half the way to the French Embassy yesterday evening in the car, and all the way back—Well, whenever I—You know. I can't bear it anymore!" she cried suddenly. "I think I'm going mad."

"Ah, no, *chérie*. Come, come *chez moi*. We must consider further about this."

In a dazed condition, weakened by another night without sleep, Celia followed Madame to her shop and then, for the first time, through the curtain into the back room. It was low, dimly lit, hung with thick woven and embroidered fabrics and dominated by a kind of altar covered with an embroidered red cloth and crowded with flowers and images, including what looked like a lion with wings.

"Sit down, please." Madame Miri indicated a low multicolored leather pouf.

"There is something," she said, opening her eyes after some moments of silent concentration. "I think this spirit of mud has got some hold on you."

"I don't know—" Celia said. "Maybe I feel guilty—"

"Guilty, that is nothing. This is not your husband, only a stupid, jealous spirit. But I think perhaps there is some object that he has given to you, and through this he has power to come to you when he desires."

Involuntarily, Celia glanced at her left wrist; at Dwayne's mother's gold watch. Madame Miri followed her gaze. "So that is his?" she asked.

"Yes. Well, it was his mother's."

"So, even worse. In it, her power is joined to his. I understand well now." She nodded several times.



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"You think I shouldn't wear this watch when I go out with someone?"

"Never you should wear it," Madame said solemnly. "It is dangerous to you always. Give it to me; I will take care of it."

Somewhat stunned by this development, Celia did not move.

"You must hold to persons, not to things," said Madame Miri, putting out her hand.

Slowly, Celia unfastened the gold mesh band and placed her Cartier watch in Madame's broad black-rimmed apricot-tinted palm, where it looked strangely small.

"But if it's so dangerous—" she said, watching what she had come to think of as her property disappear into Madame's fist. "I mean, if you have the watch, won't he come to you?"

Madame Miri laughed. "If he comes, let him come. He will have a large surprise, will he not?" She laughed again, more fully. "Don't derange yourself, *ma petite,*" she said gently. "I know how to deal with such as him, *je te le jure.*"

Five months later, Celia Zimmern and Charles Fenn were married in the garden of the American Embassy in Goto. There were well over a hundred guests, strings of colored lanterns—ruby, sapphire, topaz, and jade-green—laced the tropical evening; fireworks were set off beside the pool. Madame Miri, who had created Celia's spectacular white tulle and lace wedding dress from a Givenchy pattern, sat at one end of the long head table, resplendent in vermilion silk brocaded in gold, with a matching fantastically folded headdress.

"A day of joy," she said when Celia, circulating among company, stopped beside her. "I see that all is well with you."

"Oh, yes." Celia looked at Madame again. On both broad, glowing mahogany arms she wore a mass of gold bangles; among them was the gold Cartier watch. But that's mine, Celia wanted to say; then she faltered, realizing that the statement was false, and that anyhow this was the wrong time and place for it; that perhaps there would never be a right time or place.

Madame Miri, unembarrassed, followed the direction of her gaze. "That one has not appeared again to you, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"No, not since—" Celia glanced at her own slim wrist, on which there was now only a faint band of untanned skin. Out of practical necessity she had purchased a Timex from the embassy commissary, but usually kept it in her handbag. "Has he appeared to you?" she added, registering the emphasis in Madame's phrasing.

"*Ah oui;* I have seen him, with his little mustache," replied Madame Miri. "A good appearance, that fellow. But not interesting, no. *Jamais.* Not like that man of yours there, eh?" She gave an intimate laugh,



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bubbly with champagne, and gestured toward Charles, who was also moving among the guests.

"No," Celia said, trying to remember if she had ever told Madame Miri that the Wombat had a small mustache. She knew she had told Charles; indeed, a month ago, without really intending to do so, she had found herself telling Charles everything about Dwayne Mudd.

His reaction, as always, was interested and sympathetic. "I think most people see their former lovers sometimes, though not as clearly as you did. I used to see my wife; almost see her anyhow. And if you live in a place like this for a while you're not surprised by anything."

Somehow after that Celia had at last succeeded in forgetting Dwayne Mudd. But now, dizzied by happiness and champagne, she imagined him as a fretful ghost eternally bound to Goto, a country he would probably have deplored and detested—he hated what he called "the sticks." She even wondered if he were present this evening, invisible and inaudible except to Madame Miri.

"Do you think Dwayne's at the party, then?" she asked, glancing round uneasily, and then back at Madame Miri. In the jeweled light of the paper lanterns Madame looked larger and more formidable than ever. What she really resembled, Celia thought, was the female of the pair of larger-than-life mahogany figures in the local museum. Heavy-limbed, heavy-lidded, they had been roughly carved a century or more ago; they were identified on their label as *Gardes des portes de l'enfer*—guardians of the gates of Hell.

"No." Madame Miri shook her turbaned head slowly, so that her heavy earrings swayed. "He is not here." She was no longer laughing. "He has gone where he should go." She pointed down, toward the earth. But then she smiled and raised her glass. "Do not think more of him, *chérie*," she told Celia. "He will not trouble you again." ●

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*(Continued from page 83)*

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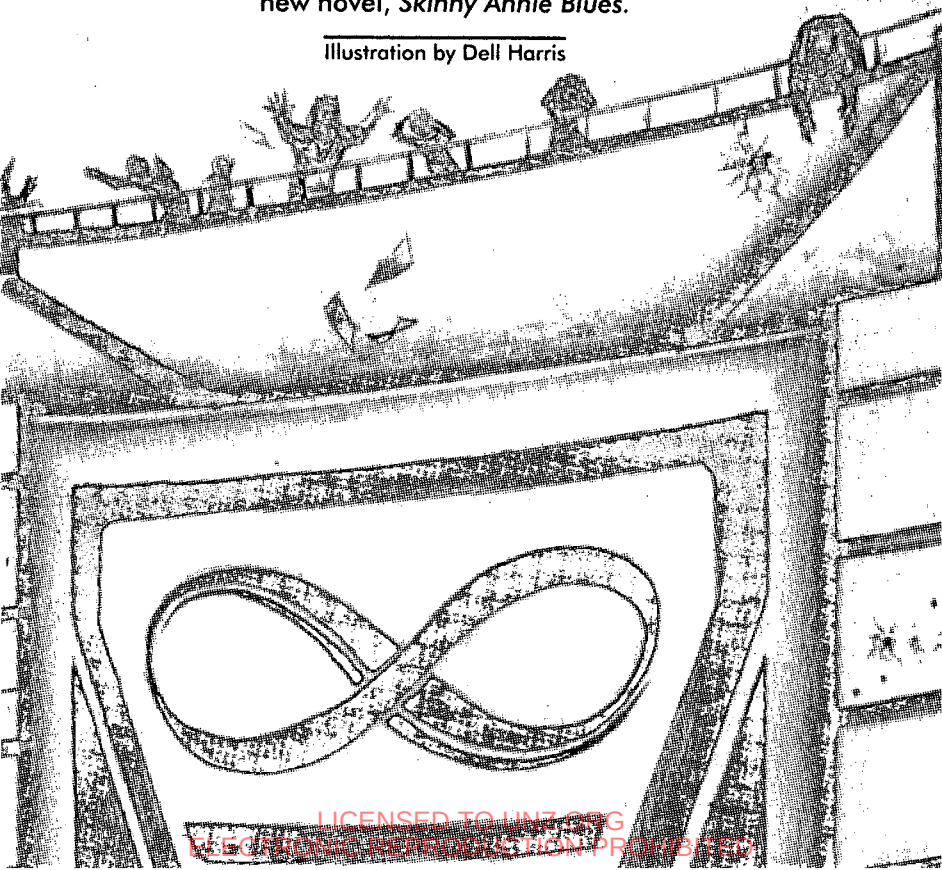
Neal Barrett, Jr.

# MANHATTAN 99

One of SF's most quirky and original thinkers returns to our pages with an unsettling look at the Big Apple. A wonderful collection of Mr. Barrett's short stories, *Slightly off Center,* was published by Swan Press in 1992. The author's most recent mystery/suspense novel *Dead Dog Blues,* came out from St. Martin's Press this past spring, and he is currently completing a new novel, *Skinny Annie Blues.*

Illustration by Dell Harris



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Every day I am putting in three hours work like everybody else. Every night I am dragging my lovely ass home more or less intact, which means I am *not* piling up a lot of excess points with Billy Biggs or Honey de la Pain. But I am *making* it, okay? I am eating I am paying half the rent. I am making it fine until Thursday night when Billy invents this *deadly* semi-fatal get-off-early-for-the-weekend rash, and I am left doing nine straight hours triple overtime in Manhattan Fifty-Six.

I ask you. How impossibly stupid can you get, letting some jerk pull a scam like that? Billy Bert *Biggs?* Jesus, Louise, you are flat *losing* it, girl.

So I am thinking real hard about this, going over in my head what kinky Dr. Bob will likely want me to do for an I.Q. shot that does *not* show up on my record somewhere. I am sitting in my cushy white chair. I am watching all the pretty lights blink. I am making an enormous effort to stay partially awake since you are *always* on the TV.

Everything is going fine. Then everything is not. All the little lights go red. Everything begins to whine, everything begins to clang, and this *person* walks right through a Hummer with this idiot smile on his face, like, "Golly gee whiz, I wonder how I did *that?"* And I am screaming and peeing in my pants and trying not to see what is happening next, which has to be the absolute *worst* thing I have seen in my entire fucking life. . . .

Second Supervisor Honey de la Pain is rubbing something cool across my face. She has also zipped down my top quite a bit which I guess you could justify some if a person has flat passed out, though I would surely have to wonder where first aid stops and the feelies start in.

"Don't try to sit up," Honey says, "you've been through a trying ordeal."

"I feel a little odd," I tell her. "Kind of fuzzy in the head."

"Gave you just a teensy happy shot, love. Nothing real strong. Can I get you some water, a cup of mice tea? You want to wee-wee? Listen, I *know* it's a bad time to ask. Do you find me attractive at all? I've been so afraid that you see me as—headstrong, pushy, a little too tall?"

I have to admit I go for the cheekbones and the rather foxy jaw, features which are somewhat diminished by the cobalt eyes and pistachio hair. Someone ought to sit this woman down and talk *color,* you know?

"You and me, I don't see a lot coming out of this," I say. "Don't get me wrong, I mean you certainly qualify as a possible erotic event. It's the workplace harrassment I really can't handle, okay? I am *not* overcome by romance with this sense of obligation in the air. You give me the eye,


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I'm thinking, hey—I got this authentic arousal for Second Supervisor de la Pain, or is it getting close to paycheck time?"

"Oh, *God,*" she says, "I was afraid it was something like this. I am so damn *dense* I just—" She stops, then, and looks alarmed. "Do you intend to throw up, Louise? That's what it looks like to me."

"There *is* a possibility," I tell her. It doesn't take a whole lot of insight to see that I've got the cold sweats, that my eyes are disappearing in my head.

"Whatever kind of drugo you gave me, Miz la Pain, it is not working out real good. I am suddenly remembering some very awful shit. I am seeing what I'm certain I do *not* want to see. . . ."

*"You didn't see a thing, Louise. You didn't, but I know you thought you did."*

This isn't Honey de la Pain talking now, this is somebody else. He is squirting a very nice tingle in my arm. He has silver filigree on his chest, strawberry hair and peppermint breath.

"First Supervisor Danny Face," he tells me with a smile. "Let's take a look. I bet you're going to be just fine." He gives me a wink, and zips my top down a bit more.

"All right," I say, "that's about enough of that." I give his hand a friendly little slap. I sit up and wait for the dizzies to disappear.

"Here's what we got here," I tell these two, before anybody else gets out of line. "I am sitting at my post, I am sitting in my chair. I am looking at my lights. Check it out on the tape. I am not doing shit that I'm not supposed to do. I am working this *triple* overtime, this *nine* hour shift for Billy Biggs—"

"Billy Bert Biggs has let us down," says First Supervisor Danny Face. "He has failed to show proper leadership. He has deserted his command. He has forfeited his comprehensive family dental plan. Billy Bert Biggs is in fecal matter up to his eyeballs, Louise. I can promise you that right now."

"We attach no blame to you whatever for this ugly incident," says Honey de la Pain.

"Which did not, by the way, actually occur," adds First Supervisor Danny Face.

"Absolutely not," says de la Pain.

I look up at Honey. I look up at Supervisor Face. Two things are happening here. Either that, or one thing that *looks* like two, it doesn't really matter which. First, that lovely shot is oozing like cinnamon pudding from my toes up to my head. I am melting very quickly and feeling very fine. There is also a small piece of rational *me* in there that does not miss the point of this happy little scene. What it's telling me is this: When that shot wears off, and you recall everything that didn't happen,



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this shit you are trying to forget, these people would be very grateful if anything that didn't occur never crossed your mind again. In fact, I have an idea if it *did* . . .

"I'm a whole lot better," I say, with a slightly daffy smile. "I expect I'd better get to work. I've wasted an awful lot of everyone's time."

"Stuff and nonsense," says First Supervisor Danny Face. "You'll do nothing of the sort." He looks real serious at Honey. "What's Louise doing now? What's her work status, Miz la Pain?"

"Chestnut, Louise," Honey says. "M.O.E. Maintenance Observer Engineer Person Third Class. Four years' service. Three interdictions. Two doubles and a quad."

"Hey, hey. *Two* doubles," says Face. "Where'd you do the quad?"

"Fifth Avenue to Park. I was with 'B' Company on 39th Street."

"*Son* of a bitch." Face points a finger in my face. "I had Easy Company on 46th."

"Forty-*Sixth?"* I make a little "yucko" with my mouth. *"Squisho,* man!"

"Damn right. We are talking deep do-do, girl. I mean, no fun for anyone."

He turns to Honey de la Pain, who isn't real happy with all this camaraderie shit. *She* didn't make the Fifth Avenue gig.

"Let's up Louise here to M.O.E. *First* Class," says Danny Face. He slides me a look that covers most of my personal and semi-private parts. "Least we can do after what happened here to our brave little gal."

I hate myself for it but I do it anyway. I flutter my fucking *lashes* at First Supervisor Danny Face.

"You mean if something *had* happened, sir?" I say, looking awful cute. "Because I certainly don't recall it *did."*

Danny Face laughs aloud. He goes "Haw-haw-haw" and gives Honey an elbow in the ribs. "This girl is all right," he says. "This lady is fine!"

"Yes, sir," Honey says, and I know I'm going to pay very dearly for this charming little event.

What I need is a drink. I need to throw up a couple of times. I need a tub hot enough you could deep-fry a rhino in, okay? What I do *not* fucking need is Tony Mech. Tony drifting in with this "Say-hey how'd it go today?" Like I am about to confide my pee-in-the-pants incident to a guy wearing nothing but lizards, right?

"Do *not* bring those disgusting creatures in here," I tell him. "I am taking a bath, Tony, in case you couldn't tell. I do not wish to talk to you now."

"Watching you cavort in the tub is a most delightsome thing," Tony says. "I stand on the brink of stimulation, Louise. I am possibly aroused."

"Fine," I tell him, "I'm not. Now please get out of here."



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Tony doesn't move. I flick a bit of foam off my finger and the lizards come to life. They make tiny paper-whisper sounds. They twitch into green agitation, into shaky unrest. They roll in a shudder, in a wave, in a chartreuse blur about his legs about his waist about his chest. Is Tony erect? Or is one of those repulsive little bastards having an epilectic fit?

"A woman in water is so—slippery and slick," Tony says. "I would give most anything to watch you love, Louise. Live or on video it wouldn't matter which."

"Don't be absurd," I tell him. "Just get the *fuck* out of here."

"Wednesday I saw *La Bohème*," Tony says.

"That's nice. So what?"

"Friday I got on this simply awesome Wagner high and watched *The Ring*."

"The whole thing?"

"Good God no. Who'd want to do that? Fast forward, seven minutes flat. Stony and Sugar were here. We did Snickers and hash. Why don't you simply *tell* your old roomy, Louise. What is eating you, hon?"

"*Nothing* is eating me, pal. Tony, will you please just go away!"

"Jeez, Louise." Tony rolls his eyes. "You are a *poem,* you know what? Your belly is a slicky white moon. Your breasts are coral isles, above the cresting foam."

"What we got here is tits in soapy water," I tell him, "and you have exactly two seconds to disappear or I will set your lizards on fire! *Get out of my bathroom right now!*"

Tony knows how far to go with me. He turns and beats a hasty retreat, turns so quickly several little crawlies fall off and have to scuttle into lizard overdrive.

When he's gone, I replay the moment and hope I haven't said anything that might offend. Tony is *not* a normal person, and I don't like him looking at my private body parts—but a good roommate is so *fucking* hard to find. . . .

Dinner is chowder and Oreos. Catfish tea and a slice of pig pie. Nothing real fancy, just something to get the meal over and done and get to bed, because I can *see* this remember-time floating like a you-know-what on the greasy septic surface of my mind. Those deep-tingle shots have kept the screamies out there in the dark, but I *know* this time they're not about to go away.

The moment I'm tucked in tight I see it all again. There I am in my official watching chair, watching the blink-lights tell me Manhattan Fifty-Six is just fine. I am thinking up ways to get back at Billy Biggs and I am watching the lights, and this *feeb* walks right through a Hummer and into my formerly simple life.



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What do I know? I am a Maintenance Observer Engineer Person Third —*wups!*—First Class. I am not into scientific shit. I know what a Hummer *is*—they give you that in the Maintenance Manual so you'll leave those mothers alone. I haven't the foggiest idea what it does and don't care. What it *is*—okay?—is a bank of horizontal lasers eighteen inches wide and seventy-two high. Each laser beam is one sixty-fourth of an inch from the other. This is very high intensity stuff, I know that, so when some goof walks *through* this thing it is not a sight that you *ever* hoped to see.

The first step is not great, but it's *there,* all right? The second step really turns to shit. I am not good at numbers, but I can tap this one out in my head. One sixty-fourth of an inch is about as wide as your average pubic hair, which gives you a fair idea what happens next. Say the clown's an even six feet. That's four thousand, six-hundred-and-eight laser *slices* walking through a Hummer and in just about a second and a half the guy is *not* looking well. Things that start off somewhere tend to keep on going if they can. That's a physical law of some kind. Friction will hold stuff together for another quarter second, and then you are watching this pretty revolting *slide-off* effect, and Salami Man comes *totally* apart, and so does yours truly, Louise. The next thing I know, Honey de la Pain is giving me a happy shot and getting a really good peek at my lovely upper parts. Then there is First Supervisor Danny Face and more of the same. I am getting peered at, poked and promoted and I still have no idea what the hell is going on. . . .

I am up and dressed at five after six. The six forty-eight is okay. Seven is a risk. You *don't* ride the seven-fifteen. Not unless your idea of fun is multiple rape standing up—I mean, people you don't even *know.* They'll take your clothing and your cash and your dirty underwear. They will take your fucking socks. These mothers will steal your fillings and your IUD.

I am scarfing down breakfast, a little leftover robin stew, a cup of lemon lye. The door begins to buzz and before I can get there Tony's got it opened up wide like he always does, he doesn't look, he doesn't care. Maybe it's the baby Jesus come to call. Maybe it's the dudes downstairs in the PRO-DEATH jackets and the patches over both eyes.

Who it is is Honey de la Pain. She stands in the door and she looks at Tony Mech. She sees a guy wearing six or eight hundred green geckos and a Daffy Duck tie. Tony looks at Honey de la Pain. He sees a knockout woman black as night wearing fishnet overalls.

"I would like to lubricate your ebon thighs with rare Egyptian oils," Tony says. "I would like to bind your lashes with tiny silver chains, and drink the dark tears from your eyes."



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"Forget it," Honey says. "You ready to go to work, Louise?"

"Uh, okay," I tell her, "I guess." Like she comes by to get me every morning, right? Like we do this all the time.

Honey gives Tony Mech a wary eye and darts out the door. I follow her down the hall. She takes long strides and I have to walk fast.

"That goofus with the lizards," Honey says, without looking back. "You into some of that?"

"My God, no," I tell her. "He's a roommate is all!"

"Good. I wouldn't even mention him to Danny if I were you. Danny's a kinda fashion nut. Besides, he doesn't much like his people playin' around."

"His—what?" I stop right where I am. "His *people,* right? I guess we're talking about what I think we're talking about."

"My, my," Honey says, with a sly little smile. "You weren't this dense yesterday, Louise. All that *eye*lash blinkin' and shit?"

"Yeah, okay, so I did." I feel a little heat.

"There's harassers and harrass*ees,* babe. Isn't anything you don't already know. Danny Face took care of you. Got you out of trouble you don't even *know* about yet. That wasn't because he's such a sweet and caring guy."

"Same thing you had in mind, huh?"

"*Have,* Louise. I still do." She lays a cool hand on my arm. She looks kinda sad. "Your pulse is not exactly *racing,* just being in my presence. I guess I know that."

I take a little breath. "Now I never said I didn't *like* you, Miz la Pain."

"What *do* you say, then?"

"I say give romance a chance."

"All *right.*" Her cobalt eyes begin to shine. "I can live with that."

"How's Danny Face?" I want to know.

"Not as good as he thinks he is. Not near as bad as Billy Biggs."

I decide not to comment on that. Billy Bert Biggs is a *slug* in every respect, but he's a stepper when it comes to the horizontal dance.

"So you think you want to tell me why you came by," I want to know. "Or where we might be going, Miz la Pain?"

"You can call me Honey," she says, "when there's no one else around. And no—you don't get any whys or any wheres. Wouldn't do you any good, because where we are going you have *never* been before."

"Yes ma'am," I tell her, "that'll be fine."

"I like that," she says. "You're cute when you pretend to be nice. Don't ever do it again."

Honey is right. I have no idea where we are. The room is enormous, maybe twenty stories high. People are rushing around on catwalks and



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stairs. People on elevators are whooshing up and down. People are here and there. People are everywhere.

"Say-hey, Louise. You are looking *fine.*"

Danny Face appears from nowhere and pats me on the ass. I say something like *"whoops!"* and I do a little hop. Danny laughs a lot. Now that I've gotten to know Miz la Pain and Danny Face, I can see the supervisory level does *not* require any great emotional depth. I will have to watch for this in myself, if I intend to get anywhere.

"Let's get with it," Danny says. "Time doesn't wait on anyone, ladies. Indolence is bliss!"

Honey rolls her eyes. She may have heard this once or twice. Danny takes my arm and pulls me up some stairs. The stairs snake around the big room. I get dizzy looking up. If I look down, I *know* I'm going to puke. Honey de la Pain's right behind me and I'd hate to do that.

Just in time, Danny Face opens a door and we are in a little room. The room has curvy white walls and white chairs. "Sit," Danny says, and I do.

"You're not going to like this," he tells me, "but it's something you've got to do. For the record, I've got to have a legal yes or no."

Before I can ask where I am or what it is I don't want to do, the room goes dark and there he is, just as real as death and life—Mr. Salami Man, winner of the horror hologram of the year. I squeeze the arms of the chair and say "shit-shit-*shit!*" or words to that effect. Just like before, the guy walks through the Hummer and comes apart. Seeing this again is bad enough, but Danny Face makes the sucker go slo-mo *backward* so I get to watch all the slices come back *together* again. What could I have possibly done to deserve this extra treat?

Now the clown is freeze-frame, half a second after his head appears. *He* doesn't know he is totally fucked, but his body's got the message loud and clear. It looks as if someone has painted these tiny red lines across his face, and I'd forgotten that god-awful grin.

"You all right, Louise?" Danny Face wants to know. "You going to be okay, kid?"

"Certainly," I tell him, "I'm fine. Jesus, who wouldn't be? Think you can get me some *stills?* Maybe an eight-by-ten and a dozen wallet size?"

"Is she something else or what?" Danny says. He squeezes my shoulder, thinks about sliding on down. "What a plucky lady we've got here, Second Supervisor de la Pain. In the face of tragedy, chaos, and a really urpy sight, our Louise comes up with a whimsy, a jest, a little joke."

"Right," Honey says, somewhere off to the left of sincere, "she's a wonder for sure."

"Now. Here's the way it goes," Danny says. "This is what we've got to do." He pulls up a chair, faces me with his hands on his knees. I have



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to admit he looks very nice in his blue lamé shirt and his squirrel-tail tie.

"I have to formally ask you, Louise Chestnut, Maintenance Observer Engineer Person First Class, if the man you see in this holo is the same man you saw walking through Hummer unit Kay-dash-oh-oh-four, at twenty-two-oh-six hours, Work Station Niner, Manhattan Fifty-Six, September 47, Year A.B. 32?"

"Yeah, that's him," I say.

"Uh, say 'I do so identify,' please."

This is what I say, then I press my thumb on the paper and Danny folds it once and hands it to Honey de la Pain.

"Okay," Danny says, "that's that. Not that anybody gives a shit. Not that anybody *cares.*"

He leans back and crosses his arms. He looks frightfully intense. "Don't know if this place is bugged or not," Danny says. "Fuck 'em if it is." He jerks a thumb at the now empty wall. "Guy went through the Hummer was Charlie T. Stacks. Had on his Maintenance greens and the proper I.D. Except that *isn't* who he was. They think we're morons down here, like all we can do is change the bulb a fucking light goes out. We did a DNA. This joker was a *Management* clown. Goddamn biggies didn't even bother to go through channels in Manhattan. They *sneaked* this egghead in from the home office in Omaha, for Christ's sake. Some bozo never got his hands dirty. Probably never even *saw* a Hummer before. Didn't even know what it was."

Honey rolls her eyes. *"Hell* of a thing. First day on the job."

"You bet," says Danny Face. He almost grins, a little scowl that turns up at the ends. "Serves the bastard right."

"A Hummer Bummer," says la Pain.

"Hey, I am taking points off for that," says Danny Face.

Everybody's intense. Everybody's having fun. What *I* am wondering is—what I've been wondering ever since Second Supervisor de la Pain so kindly brought me here—is what I am *doing* in this place, what all this has to do with me?

"I can tell," says Danny Face, "I can see you are puzzled and perplexed, Louise. You are wondering why you're here, what all this has to do with you."

"Yes, sir," I tell him, "I have to say I am."

"You're here because you were *there,* Louise. You saw the home office make the big boo-boo. It's all out in the open now. They know that we know. We know they know we know they—"

*"Danny—!"* says Honey de la Pain.

"Okay. Right. Anyway, there you were. No use giving you a deady-bye shot. It was all on tape anyhow. Besides, Honey felt you were awful cute, and I certainly had to agree."



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"I guess I appreciate that."

"No problem," Danny says. He leans in and pokes a finger at my breast—the very slightly smaller one on the left.

"We are *not* your rocket scientists, okay? But we are proud to wear the Maintenance green. We knew there was a glitch somewhere. I'm not talking your double or your quad now and then, I am talking major shit. Here, in Denver, in Miami, in Detroit. So we tell Omaha they ought to *look,* you know? We figure basic design flaw; something isn't right way back, it's turning up now."

Danny Face gets up. He jams his hands in his pockets and stalks about. "MAI doesn't like this at all. They don't *make* mistakes, it's got to be us. It's S.W.O., right? Shit Wears Out. It's *us* going slack, letting stuff get by. Only they know this isn't so. That's why they start sneaking these goofballs in to take a look. The dummy you saw wasn't the first, just the first one here."

I am waiting for the rest. Only First Supervisor Danny Face is not saying anything at all. A chill starts up my spine like a nasty little bug. "Well the—company has to do something, don't they?" I say. "If they know something's wrong. . . . What—what are *you* going to do?"

"Get my ass out of here, Louise." He shows me a crooked grin. "Doesn't matter *what* I do. The fucker's unraveling, babe, it is coming apart."

"I don't believe that," I tell him. "If something's broken, why we—got to get it fixed."

"Hah!" says Danny Face. He looks at his watch and crooks his head. He taps the little opal in his ear. "The news is not good, ladies. A double-quad in Seattle. A triple in New Orleans. I *don't* think we've got a lot of time."

"Oh, God!" Honey looks appalled.

"Get a grip on yourself," Danny says. "Act like a supervisor, Miz la Pain."

"I'll act any way I like," Honey says. "You can take your—Jesus, what's that!"

"Unless I'm mistaken, I would say that's small arms fire. I really thought we had a day or so. I see that I was wrong."

Danny Face goes to the door. He opens it slightly and peeks out through a crack. A siren is shrieking somewhere. Someone is screaming. Automatic weapons go *braaaka-braaka-braak!*

Danny swings the door wide open. Two men in Maintenance green run by. Danny jerks one to a halt.

"Where is it," he says, "and how much?"

"Eighty-two through ninety-nine," the man says. He stares at Danny Face. "Everything from the Village up to Central Park South." Danny tries to hold him but the man breaks free and takes off.



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"It *can't* be," I say. I grip Danny's arm. I do the figures in my head. A quad is bloody awful. I can't even imagine *seventeen!*

Honey looks faint. Danny Face doesn't even blink. He leads us down the stairs. Traffic is heavy and he keeps us to the wall as best he can. I hear a horrible sound. A woman falls past us, heading thirty stories down.

"Central Core is clearly turning to shit," Danny says. "There's nothing for us here."

Gunfire again. This time very close. There is a narrow catwalk that spans the sickening depths. Two men stand there. Their weapons are shiny, their uniforms are black. Company men. The patches on their breasts read MAI.

"Can't cross here, sir," the first guard tells Danny Face. "This entry's restricted to everyone."

"Fuck that," Danny says. He shakes his hand quickly and a tiny silver shooter appears. It barks like a yip-dog twice. The guards look surprised, as blue holes appear between their eyes.

Honey sucks in a breath and goes white. "You—you *killed* those men," she says, which is something nearly anyone can see. "You can't *do* that!"

"Wrong," Danny says. "Life as we know it is going down the crapper as we speak. Get your wits about you, de la Pain."

Danny leads us over the catwalk and into an empty hall. There is an entire bank of empty tubes. Danny takes the first one on our right. The door whispers shut. He looks at the bright yellow buttons, then punches eighty-six.

"What are you *doing!*" Honey says, and stares at Danny Face. "Eighty-six is a—"

"It's a dead level, Pain." Danny quickly cuts her off. "Will you kindly use your head? Everything's dead from eighty-two to ninety-nine. That's the only way out of here now. Omaha has got to try to keep this quiet. You don't *think* about it, maybe everything will be fine? I can goddamn promise you it won't. Everyone's punching buttons right now, and no one's going anywhere. Omaha's shut everything off."

I do not move at all. Honey holds her breath. She digs her nails into her palms. I can feel the peculiar little tingle as we pass each level, as it trembles, as it sighs; each palpitation sings a slightly different song, a molecular shiver goes up the scale or down, a whisker to the left or to the right. A musical person I know says his senses are enhanced by certain costly drugs—that under these conditions he has perfect pitch and knows exactly where he is at any time. This may or may not be so. I met this person through Sylvia Knack, and I met *her* through Tony Mech.

Poor Tony! A man with a reptile wardrobe does not function well in



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the very best of times. If everything's going to pieces like Danny Face says, I can't imagine how Tony will fare.

The door slides open to darkness at Manhattan Eight-Six. Or Eighty-Two if you like, or Ninety-Nine, it doesn't greatly matter which.

"I don't want to see this," Honey says, "I simply won't!"

"Then don't," Danny says. He cuts a little shaft through the night with a tiny pen light. I am grateful that it's not high noon. A cruncho is never a pretty sight, and it's exceedingly gross in the full light of day. I don't blame Honey de la Pain. I've been on the clean-up detail a little more than she has is all.

Danny spots the blinking blue light up ahead and turns off his flash, and motions for Honey and me to be still. The chopper is black. It has the company's curvy little Möbius logo on the side, and MULTIPLE AMERICA, INC.

Danny walks up real quietly and sticks his silver shooter in the pilot's left ear. He says, "Take it easy, son—you all alone down here?"

The pilot says "Yes, sir," and doesn't move an inch.

"What is it you're supposed to do?"

"Just wait here, sir. In case anybody shows."

"Anybody like me."

"Yes, sir."

"You want to live a long time?"

"Yes sir, I truly do."

"Hop in, ladies," Danny says.

As the rotors start to whir, I look around at the scene down below. I smell the awful smell and I figure I am just like everyone else. You go about your business and you figure if anything happens, it certainly won't happen to you. The jerk next door gets his toilet stopped up, that's his problem, not yours. Probably what everyone *here* thought, too, right before seventeen Manhattans from Greenwich to 59th suddenly occupied the very same space at one time. That's a lot of winos and hookers and yellow taxi cabs, a lot of really yucky shit.

Danny looks down and shakes his head. He puts his hand on my knee. "What a mess," he says. "I guess it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Where you people want to go?" the pilot says.

"Fucking anywhere there is." says Honey de la Pain. ●



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Barbara Mater

# DELVING IN THE DARK

The renowned SF writer, Arthur C. Clarke, chose Barbara Mater's "Delving in the Dark" for first place in the Oxford University Press Science Fiction Story Writing Contest. The contest was held in conjunction with the publication of *The Oxford Book of Science Fiction Stories,* edited by Tom Shippey. Ms. Mater has studied with Nancy Kress, Connie Willis, and Karen Joy Fowler at the Writer's Forum Science Fiction workshops held annually at SUNY Brockport. Her fiction has appeared in *Mars* magazine, *The Gaslight Review, Mysteries from the Fingerlakes,* and *Rochester Shorts.*

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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"Somebody's out there, Raymond." Penelope stood at the screen door of the old New England farmhouse, staring into blue twilight. She drew her worn pink cardigan across her thin chest and folded her arms. It was a cool evening for May. "Looks like a bunch of little kids."

Her husband, at the kitchen table behind her, lowered his newspaper. "In the pouring rain, on a school night?" Raymond propped his reading glasses on top of his sparse grey hair. "What are they doing, Mama?"

She squinted. Half a dozen small dark figures crowded busily into the deepening shadow of the old garage, on the far side of the driveway where the lawn sloped down toward the creek a hundred yards away. "I can't tell."

Raymond got up and stood beside her at the door. "Where are the binoculars?"

She thought a moment, smiling to herself. It was always a guess as to where he might have left things. "I don't know, Raymond."

"Up in the bedroom, I think. You go, Mama. You're quicker'n I am these days."

It was true. But then, Penelope thought, she'd always been quicker than Raymond in some respects, such as keeping track of things.

She found the binoculars upstairs on his dresser, and pointed them out the bedroom window. The kids were still there. Penelope recognized the spread-legged stance, the swing of small arms and shoulders. They were digging. Why? And more than that, why *here?* Puzzled, she made her way back down the stairs, pausing on the landing to turn on the light.

When she got back to the kitchen, Raymond took the binoculars from her, and swung the screen door open for a better view. The door squeaked.

Like a school of fish, the small figures straightened up all at once and turned to look at him. Raymond's jaw dropped, and he let the door slam shut. In perfect formation, the children ran silently away into the darkness.

Where had they gone? Penelope slipped outside. From the end of the porch, she saw them head for the woodlot. A flicker of red among the trees caught her attention. She looked quickly, but saw nothing more except the dark heap of brush that Raymond had thrown in between the trees when he'd cleaned up the yard last fall. Perhaps a cardinal had flown past the porch light.

She stepped back into the warmth of the kitchen, and nudged Raymond. "What do you suppose they were after?"

Raymond was still staring after them, and she wondered at his slightly shaken look. "I dunno." He set the binoculars on top of the refrigerator next to the coleus plant. "Burying treasure?" he guessed, with a nervous chuckle. "Remember how Tammy and Bobby always played at that?"

Penelope shut the kitchen door. It was raining for the third night in a row. "When our kids were that size, they were in before dark. Do you suppose their parents know?"



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Raymond looked away, then said, "Probably don't know or care. They may be trailer-camp brats."

Penelope felt sad for the little diggers.

Rain pounded on the roof as the dark gathered in. Raymond kept glancing out the window and shaking his head. "Haven't seen a spring this wet since I was a boy."

In the morning it was raining harder. Raymond slept late, as he liked to do in wet weather, but Penelope woke early and hungry. Coffee and toast in hand, she stood at the kitchen door looking out. There were bushel-basket-sized holes along the hillside down toward the apple trees that lined the swollen creek.

The sight worried her. It seemed as if by digging all those holes, rudely and pointlessly, in their smooth green lawn, the kids from the trailer camp had made some threat to her and Raymond's safety. *What do they want with us?* And yet it was a pity if they had no place else to play.

No use talking to Raymond about filling in the holes. Especially in the rain; his arthritic knees would be bothering him. He got up around noon and sat at the kitchen table. "Now listen, Mama, you stay inside today, out of the wet. You know I don't trust the creek when the water's high."

"Right, I know." She'd heard those words many times before. She wasn't afraid of a little rain, but she didn't say so.

Raymond went down cellar to putter away the afternoon in his workshop.

To cheer herself, Penelope baked a big batch of molasses cookies, which left the kitchen warm and spicy-smelling.

Around four, when she could create no more chores for herself, she decided to go outside. Bundling up in an old pair of jeans and a couple of sweatshirts, plus Raymond's hunting jacket and her garden hat and boots, Penelope went out into the cold rain. She closed the screen door softly, not wanting to worry Raymond, and picked her way down the steps to the soggy lawn.

The creek was still rising. Dark water rushed downstream, toward the little low bridge on the highway, sweeping over grass along the banks and carrying away fallen branches from the trees. The water coming up onto the lawn looked clear as old windowpanes, rippling over the green blades. She put one finger into it, at the edge. Her finger quickly grew numb with the cold. Penelope put it in her mouth, as if it had been stung.

The creek had made Raymond nervous every spring since they'd first moved out here to his old boyhood home. Bobby and Tammy, then in grade school, had been warned repeatedly not to play near the water when it was high, but Penelope had watched Raymond staring after them anxiously whenever they went outside.

"Yes, it scares me," he'd told her. "I'm afraid that creek will devour them, Penny. It seems like the water has a will of its own when it gets



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going like this. My dad used to say there was something alive in it, and he didn't mean fish."

Now Bobby and Tammy were safely grown and gone, and after all these years Penelope sensed that they had formed an uneasy truce with the creek.

The holes, lined up about a hundred feet back from the water, appeared to be about three feet deep and three feet wide. They weren't filling up with water. The kids had piled the dirt on the uphill side, so the diverted runoff trickled down into the grass. Clever kids.

In the air over the yard hung a good woodsy, loamy smell, like freshly turned forest earth. She marveled how smells could linger in the rain.

Penelope tried to count the holes, but after the tenth one, she could not see far enough in the rain to tell how many more there were. She wasn't even sure how far back the row went, since it was just too wet to crawl through the brush by the creek, or wade through the long grass and cross the pasture fence. It would have been a big job to dig a row all the way across the old empty pasture, overgrown after several summers without cows.

Penelope doubled back up the hill and approached the woodlot, a stone's throw behind the house. The brushpile in there was much larger than she'd remembered: probably six feet high and twice as wide. She wondered when Raymond had enlarged it, and why. Dozens of little oozy footprints in the mud nearby told her that the kids must have found the old shortcut through the lot, the weedy path to the road where the trailer camp was.

When she got back to the house, she filled her big stainless steel mixing bowl with molasses cookies and put some plastic wrap over it. Then she set it on the porch, toward the middle where it wouldn't get wet. If the kids came back, maybe they'd eat the cookies, and be grateful enough to stop making holes in the lawn.

Her outdoor clothes were soaked and she felt chilled as soon as she stopped moving around. By the time she had changed into dry clothes and eaten a couple of cookies herself, Raymond came upstairs. "What have you been doing, Penny?" His voice was tight, and she saw him looking at her wet footprints by the door and at his wet jacket on the coat hook behind the washing machine.

She looked up. "I went out to look at the holes."

"Well, I wish you wouldn't," he scolded. "The delvers come out, that means a flood, and you know I don't trust that creek out there."

Penelope sat down at the table. "Delvers?" She searched his face for clues to the unfamiliar word.

Raymond sat opposite her. "That's what my dad used to call 'em. Delvers. Said that they live in the ground." He took a bite of a cookie. "Course I thought it was just another one of his tall tales. At least I did till last night. Those kids we saw weren't regular *kids*, Mama."

She wondered whether he was joking.

"Dad said they'd been heard of around here ever since his grandfather's



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time and maybe before that, though he'd only seen them once. Or *thought* he did. He saw the *holes* all right. The delvers don't show up too often, but when they do they dig holes. Don't know what they dig 'em for, but they only do it when the creek gets real high."

Penelope felt a smile try to climb up onto her face. "Is that supposed to be the truth, Raymond," she asked softly, "or is it some kind of fairy tale?"

"Now did you ever know me to tell fairy tales?" Raymond asked sharply. But he wouldn't look at her, kept his eyes busy watching his fingers break up a cookie into little pieces.

Her smile arrived. "Well, you used to tell Tammy and Bobby tall tales yourself about Ichabod Crane and the headless horseman." She gave him a knowing look.

Raymond's face was pained. "That was just for fun, Mama."

"Yes," she answered soothingly, "but it's hard to tell when you're joking. . . . "

Raymond chased cookie crumbs around on the table cloth with his finger. Penelope figured his feelings were hurt. While she was still wondering what to think, he asked, "What's for dinner, Mama?"

Penelope set about cooking. He'd get over his sulk.

Once she was good and busy, Raymond went into the living room. After a few minutes he called, "Mama, come here. And bring the binoculars."

She turned the fire down on the way. "Here you are."

"It's them all right." Raymond took the binoculars, and stared out into the night.

She poked him in the side. "Let me see."

He moved over about an inch. She squeezed in beside him at the window. Rain rippled the glass, but she could see that the diggers were there again, indistinct in the last light of the dark day. Raymond kept watching, shifting from foot to foot.

Penelope figured his knees were hurting from the damp weather. She squinted into the darkness. The small figures seemed to be all the same size, and moved in loose-limbed unison, like a little boys' drill team. "Still look like kids to me."

Raymond scratched his head. "Yeah. Maybe so. If you say so." He sounded a bit sarcastic.

"But it's funny," Penelope pondered, "how they all look so much alike."

"I suppose," Raymond stared down his nose at her, looking playful and annoyed at the same time, "it's the dirt. Uniform layer of dirt, you see. Bet none of 'em had a bath this year. Supper ready?"

It was. They went into the kitchen. Raymond set the binoculars firmly on top of the refrigerator, knocking a couple of leaves off the coleus. Penelope wondered why he so badly wanted to convince her that those weren't just kids out there. She wished she could get a look at the children by daylight.

She served the food, and they ate without conversation. Raymond was



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dunking a molasses cookie in his coffee when something clanked on the porch and Penelope heard small feet running away. She smiled to herself.

Then there was a rumbling sound, and a flash of lightning out in the yard. After the blue-white glare had faded there was a much smaller flash of red. *Red?* Had something caught fire? Penelope got up to look, snagging the binoculars on the way. Out on the porch, the cookie bowl was gone. Of the diggers, and of the red light and its source, she could see nothing.

"Raymond, what was that red flash?"

"Oh, uh, lightning, I guess." His voice was still tight, impatient. He joined her at the door and she linked her arm through his.

She hoped the kids would make it home all right. Poor things, with no one to care how they came or went.

Lightning flashed again, followed by a momentary red glow from the brushpile. It seemed to Penelope that the flash burned an image onto her eyes, a tableau of six or seven small shaggy dark figures, all about four feet tall, with nondescript tatters for clothing.

Raymond grunted and flipped the wall switch, turning on the two-hundred-watt porch light.

Little dark figures straightened up all at once, like startled guppies, and ran off silently, in step.

Raymond chuckled as he watched them run. "That's right," he said, "get out of here."

They were headed for the woodlot again. Penelope was taken aback by the sight: the more she saw of them, the stranger they looked. Maybe Raymond was right; maybe she shouldn't doubt him. "Delvers . . Raymond, what did your dad say delvers do, besides dig holes?"

Another pulse of unmistakably red light.

Raymond huffed. "He didn't say. But I think we're about to find out."

Lightning flashed again and Penelope saw the delvers coming back, this time not with shovels but with strangely carved and decorated wooden sticks, long as their little arms, all highly polished and banded with gleaming silver.

She marveled. "What have they got there?"

With answering, Raymond gently detached her hand from his arm and limped stiff-kneed toward the cellar door. Penelope knew he kept his shotgun behind that door.

But the delvers didn't come up to the house. They jumped into the holes. One of them turned around and waved his stick at the porch light. A tiny flicker of thin red lightning crackled across the yard, with a soft sound like a piece of cellophane being discreetly crumpled. It disappeared into the porch light, which popped loudly and went out. This left the yard in darkness except for the little square of yellow light from the kitchen that spilled out around Penelope as she stood, in shocked silence, in the doorway.

Raymond came back with the shotgun, and Penelope's heart sank. "Raymond, don't—" but she broke off at the challenge of his level eyes



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and lifted chin, and because out there in the darkness she heard a deep loud growling as of many dogs, and a splashing sucking stomp of huge feet that shook the ground and rattled the house windows. Something large and heavy was advancing up the hill from the creek.

She shivered.

A clod of mud crashed through the kitchen window over the washing machine, leaving the red-checked curtain shredded by broken glass, and the rain blowing in. Penelope gasped.

Raymond stepped in front of her, the gun broken open over his arm. "Get down, Mama."

She stepped back a little.

Red lights continued to crackle in the yard. A clod of mud whacked the side of the house. The thermometer outside the broken window fell, and shattered tinkling on the stones below.

Raymond's fingers trembled as he leaned forward with the binoculars. Still he did not close the gun.

"What's there, Raymond?"

"It's . . . a great big wet THING." He swallowed, shuffled nervously on the kitchen floor, but still kept the binoculars trained on the yard. "Shooting rocks and stuff at us and the kids. It's about seven feet tall, and it's all drippy and it keeps—well, you can hear it growling, can't you? Ain't deaf yet, are you?"

"Don't sass me." But she knew he was just trying to cover up his fear.

Something struck the side of the house, shaking the wall.

Raymond's voice lost its edge. "Call the police, Mama."

The phone, when she picked it up, was dead. "No dial tone." Whatever was out there, they were alone with it.

Raymond grunted and turned off the kitchen light, so they could see into the night outside.

The monster stomped its way up the hill, growling like a power saw. Penelope could now see that it looked like a many-limbed sprawl—an elephantine centipede. It seemed like a nightmare sculpture constructed of mud and rotten leaves, with rain for blood, its whole being propelled by sonorous anger. Its stench was captured by the damp air and she gagged at the odor of decay.

The little delvers were still crackling away at the creature with those curiously sculpted and adorned wooden sticks. "How do they *do* that?" Penelope whispered.

The thing from the creek growled and flailed and stomped and shook the ground, hurling mud and stones at the delvers, who dodged as best they could. Mud hit the screen door, spattering Penelope's legs and the kitchen floor.

"Get out of the doorway," Raymond snapped, still not raising the gun. He scowled as if weighing a grave decision.

Lightning continued to flash in the sky, and to be answered by red flares from the woodlot and tiny branched flickers from the delvers' staves. Penelope's hair rose on the back of her neck. Had they set fire to



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the brushpile? A pretty good trick, after three nights of rain. Why did they stay out there?

Her eyes were getting used to the darkness. She saw the monster raise one thick dripping limb and throw something at the little beings in the holes. There was a crack and a splat, like the sound of a melon being dropped on stone. For a few seconds, no more red lights flashed.

Penelope scooted past Raymond, out onto the porch. "Are you hurt?" she called. Poor little things.

There was no answer.

Raymond burst through the door. The shotgun boomed, as he fired into the air.

As she watched, more delvers hurried down from the pasture. It looked like the entire third grade from the central school, at least a hundred of them, jogging toward the battleground. Taking up positions among the original fighters, they too aimed threads of red lightning at the monster, which began to steam and to drop bits of itself on the ground.

The creature stopped coming. As the red light hit it over and over, it swiped with a crumbling appendage at what might have been its face. Thunder rumbled, and the sky lit up for a moment. Penelope shivered as the last shreds of doubt left her: the little yellow-eyed faces turned up toward the monster were not those of children.

They were, as Raymond had said earlier, dark and shaggy, but they had an aged, weathered look, more of bark and twigs than flesh and blood. Raymond was right about the dirt. But it was just a rough, woodsy dirt. She could smell it now, in spite of the monster's stench.

Raymond took fresh aim. "Get back now, Mama."

She didn't move.

The wet thing lifted its arm again and flung a chunk of itself right at her. Stones ripped through the screen, one grazing Penelope's ear. She retreated to the sink, got a piece of paper towel and wiped blood from her ear. When no more stones flew in, she peeked around the doorframe again.

The delvers held their ground. The monster was falling apart. Cut by tiny lightning: hunks of it seemed to break off and tumble into the grass, like a melting snowman. It threw no new clods. From its dismembered mass, a rank slimy odor continued to rise.

Raymond steadied himself and the shotgun boomed again: the other barrel. Penelope watched bits of monster fly apart, like sopping leaves and clumps of mud, scattering back down the hill, to be washed into the creek by the rain.

"How long, I wonder," Raymond mused. "Till that thing puts itself back together under the water?" His eyes met Penelope's, but she looked away quickly.

Never turning back, the little soldiers climbed out of their holes and trotted off toward the woodlot.

Raymond drew Penelope back inside. "You all right?"

"I guess," she nodded. "You?"



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"Yup."

"What *are* they, Raymond?"

"What I said they were." He headed for the cellar to put away the shotgun.

Whatever they were, they had put up a real struggle. Were any of them hurt? Were any still out there suffering in the cold? Had they left anything behind, any clues to help a person know them? She helped herself to Raymond's jacket again, put on her hat, and went outside.

The brushpile was glowing fiercely now, and by its light Penelope could see that one hole was still occupied, by a small body that looked achingly like a sleeping child. Its skull showed a narrow wound, oozing dark fluid.

She bit her lip, stifling horror, and picked up the little delver. It weighed not more than a soaking wet eight-year-old child, but it was a limp and awkward burden. She could not tell if it was breathing, nor could she guess if it was the kind of thing that ought to be. *If you were human, I'd take you to the hospital.* But it was not human. She did not know what it was. "Hey," she called, starting after the others. "What about him?"

She carried the little creature to the woodlot, maybe fifty steps. She looked for his companions, but she didn't see them. The good clean earthy smell she had noticed before was strongest of all here.

The brushpile was not burning. Something inside it was glowing. A brighter space appeared at one side of the pile, as if a door had opened.

She could not see inside, but she could *feel* dozens of little yellow eyes watching, dozens of child-sized creatures waiting for her next move. She set her burden down, very gently, by the bright spot and backed away, shielding her eyes from the intensity of the light. "Don't forget your friend!" she called, her voice hoarse with pity and wonder.

Nothing happened for a minute or so. It was pretty cold outside, and she figured there was nothing more that she could do, so she started for the house. A few paces away, Penelope turned around for a last look. The light swelled and faded a bit and the little body was gone.

About the time she reached the corner of the house, there was a low whoosh and whir, followed by a roar of—wind?—and a loud clatter as sticks and brush were strewn over the yard.

A faint red glow remained in the woodlot, but she could see that no dark lumpy pile of brush obscured the horizon between the bare trees. The red light winked out, leaving the night pitch black and quiet: no more running feet, no more growling.

She noticed, after a few moments, that the storm had ended, too. In the silence she heard a familiar sound: the ringing of the empty cookie bowl as it rolled from the woodlot down toward the house. ●



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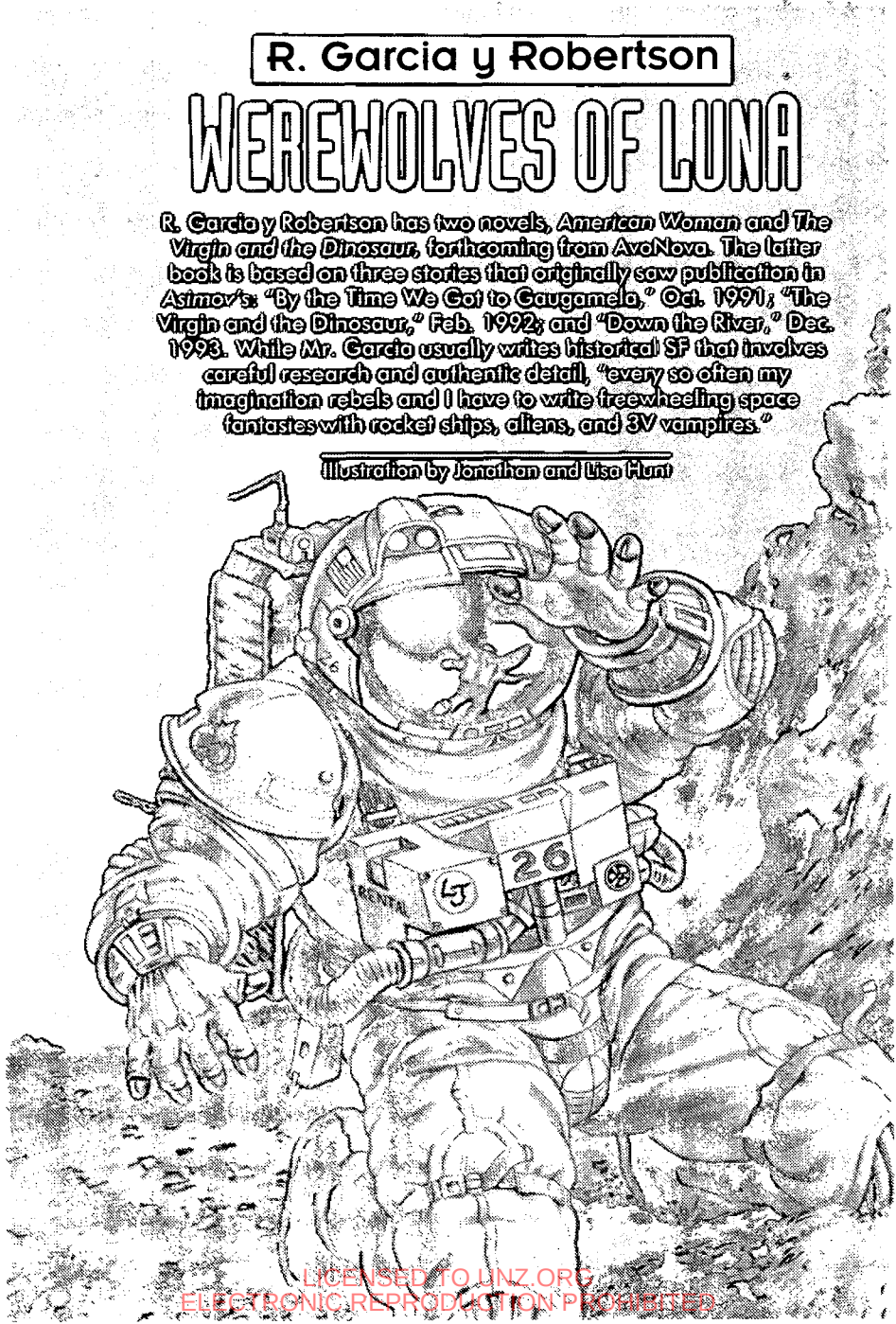
R. Garcia y Robertson

# WEREWOLVES OF LUNA

R. Garcia y Robertson has two novels, *American Woman* and *The Virgin and the Dinosaur*, forthcoming from AvoNova. The latter book is based on three stories that originally saw publication in *Asimov's*: "By the Time We Got to Gaugamela," Oct. 1991; "The Virgin and the Dinosaur," Feb. 1992; and "Down the River," Dec. 1993. While Mr. Garcia usually writes historical SF that involves careful research and authentic detail, "every so often my imagination rebels and I have to write freewheeling space fantasies with rocket ships, aliens, and 3V vampires."

Illustration by Jonathan and Lisa Hunt



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*"It was a unique, almost mystical environment up there."*
*—Edwin E. "Buzz" Aldrin, Jr.*

*Down and Out in Orbit*

Ian was lost, listening to the last of his air hiss away, when he saw the moon faerie—a silvery form flitting on gossamer wings among the slumped peaks and scree slopes. He snapped his head about, trying to hold the glimmering light in focus. Lunascape reeled and tilted, but his battered tourist helmet couldn't turn quick enough. Horizontal reference is haphazard on Luna—limited field of vision and the short horizon made local features lean alarmingly. Before Ian could compensate, the faerie had slipped from sight.

Hallucination, was his first thought. Oxygen starvation. Hypoxia. Rapture of the Void. He had been stretching the last of his air (Heaven knows *why*), cranking the intake valve down to a whisper, letting blood oxygen dip into the danger zone, ignoring seductive warnings from his suit. "Do not lower your air flow," advised a husky, come-hither voice, whispering into his left ear. Even idiot suit computers knew that young males paid more attention to *sexy* voices. This throaty whisper had swaying hips, pert nipples, and a neck like Nefertiti. Ian could *hear* the willing smile. "Time to renew your air supply—*please* return to your vehicle."

"Fine advice, but I *cannot find* my goddamned vehicle!"

Unless the faerie returned, Ian was going nowhere. The surrounding bit of moonscape seemed familiar—a low saddle between two slumped peaks, littered with pebbles, talus, and house-sized boulders. But so much of Luna looked the same.

And all the while, his air kept hissing away.

No natural complainer, Ian still resented this slow measured extinction. He was near to thirty, with three advanced degrees, a solid career in mass conversion maintenance, a dry Scots humor, and even decent judgment—when he deigned to use it. Cosmetic medicine gave him trendy unblemished features, and he owned a thatch-and-stone bothy in the Hebrides. Damn it, he played the *bagpipes,* too—"Practically a lost *art* for Christ's sake! What a waste!"

On the Moon less than forty hours, his death had to set a record for non-impact fatalities—fastest tourist kill since a load of Zen sightseers aboard the *Dharma Bum* completed their current incarnations by carving a fresh crater inside Tycho. Barely two hours before, Ian had been atop a peak, able to *see* the goddamned rover, sitting on the *mare*—a shining silverfish on a basalt plate. That's when he thought he'd take a new route back. "No sense seeing the same Moon twice."

The suit's mapping program was supposed to project an optimum route onto his visor, using broken yellow lines. But the dotted lines had not taken him back to his rover. Instead, the lying yellow brick road only led him deeper into the *Montes Carpatus,* the Lunar Carpathians, part of a highland arc forming the southern shoreline of the Sea of Showers.


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(The *montes* were named for a range in Poland or Hungary—Ian was not sure which, and never likely to know now.) He was lost amid the protruding bones of the ancient moon, blunt peaks and scree slopes older than the surrounding *mare*. Older than life on Earth. A bouldered moonscape, saturated with impact craters, filled with stark shadows so solid he couldn't see into them.

Halo comsats and lagrange navigation stations were supposed to instantly locate anyone, anywhere on Luna. But the same suit-flu that infected the mapping program had locked his comlink on Radio Ganymede. Upsun rockabilly jammed the wavelength. Right now he was listening to a folksy refrain by "Jolly King Jove and the Red Spots," accompanied by mouth harps, guitar, ceramic jugs, and an electronic washboard:

*Us gud ol boys ahn Ganymede,*
*Got us ah gee-tar an a band . . .*

Amateur night in the Jovian moons was drowning Ian out. He could *see* Jupiter, eight-hundred-million kilometers away, a yellowish disk among the hard sharp stars. He shouted for Jolly King Jove to "Shut the hell up!" A futile gesture. At light speed, the signal would take forty-five minutes to reach the Jovians—Ian would be dead long before Ganymede could reply. He reached up and gave the suit antenna a vicious jerk, snapping it at the base with an armored gauntlet. That did not solve his communications glitch, but at least he could hear himself think. Suddenly, everything was as quiet and cryptlike as only the Lunar Highlands could be. Silent and spooky beyond belief.

Softer sounds filled out the silence. His suit and helmet formed a compact little coffin, whirring with life, holding back burning daylight and freezing night. Air hissed in at the nape of his neck. He had water in his helmet tank. By turning his head to the right or left, he could pop pills onto his tongue—glucose and vitamins on one side, hard drugs on the other—synthetic opiates to block out pain and fear, powerful amphetamines to pump him up. Readouts on his visor told him his pulse and respiration rate, blood oxygen, air supply, radiation exposure, interior-exterior temperature, even the time of day in Greenwich, England. When the hiss of air gave out, his treacherous, friendly-faulty suit would continue to hum for months—maybe years. Micrometeorite erosion takes eons, a millimeter every ten million years. His body would be there for good, a grotesque little warning for future tourists.

The faerie came back, a silver form leaping between bright sunlight and black shadow, its gossamer wings shot with rainbow colors. Why wings on an airless world? "Ian, old son—you are not just dying, but flipping your set switches as well." (Suit tapes of hypoxia victims were full of fanciful imaginings, mirages of home, mother, and rescue ships that weren't there.) The first faerie was joined by a second.



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Just as quickly, they were both gone, disappearing into dense shadow. Ian had the impression that they were playing with him.

He gobbled several white stim pills, washing them down with tepid water from his helmet tube—long term addiction was not an immediate worry. Drugs snaked through his veins, snapping the moonscape into sharp, crisp focus, like a 3V negative of some brilliant desert scene, where sand and sky are black and shadows glaring white.

Ian pushed off, full of drugs and anger, dizzily determined to find the dancing lights and force them to take him to the rover.

"Warning, you are now on 120 second reserve—kindly return to your vehicle."

Reaching around, Ian clamped his helmet intake valve down tight, cutting off the hiss of air, saving his last breaths for when he really needed them. He still had the stale air in his suit and helmet, sweaty as a jock strap, but breathable. He shuffled forward. Short steps. Shallow breaths. With no rush of air to cool his sunlit helmet, perspiration collected in the suit's itchy plastic collar. Suffocating closeness dulled his sense of self-preservation. Even before he'd started seeing moon faeries and talking back to his suit, Ian had noted an insane desire to tear off the confining helmet, breathe the pure, cool vacuum. Catastrophic decompression might rip his lungs out, but it would save him from dying in a slobbering brainless stupor. Ian did not look forward to lying face-down in the *regolith,* drowning in his own sweat and $CO_2$, while sultry recordings told him he was in trouble.

With his air shut off, he actually felt better. No annoying little hiss to remind him of his troubles. Best of all, the faeries came back. Ian admired their low gliding leaps, touching down every ten or twenty meters—barely making contact—skimming prima donnas with a million years' practice. They had no faces, just gentle hollows where the mouth and eyes should be.

Ian's blood oxygen blinked red. He ignored it. The sensuous voice in his suit pleaded, "Please open your helmet intake valve." The brute mechanical valve could not be overriden by his suit computer. He told the sexy, synthesized voice to, "Put ah sock in it." Ian was not ready to take his next-to-last breath. The faeries did not seem to bother with breathing.

He started to step off again, meaning to meet the hallucinations halfway—but his legs were locked. Looking down, Ian found that he was kneeling. He had fallen without knowing it. Fine cohesive sand, produced by eons of micrometer impacts, had softened the impact, sliding and caking, spreading the force outward.

Blood oxygen blinked angrily. Time to obey that sweet persistent recording—"Please, open your intake valve." Reaching back, Ian fumbled about, finding the intake tap—but he could not make it turn. He struggled to close his gloved hand. Numb fingers no longer had the strength to work the tap, to get at those last breaths. He pitched headfirst into the lunar dust.



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Dust falls gently in one-sixth *g*, like a slow-mode damask curtain. Through the falling motes, Ian could see the highlands tilted sideways, butted against stark cosmic night. *What a stupid way to die!* Ian loved life, loved it so much that being on the moon had made him want to climb mountains. Cold emptiness crept through the sweaty heat of his suit, descending his spine, balling in his gut. He had gone too far. Fucked up once too often.

As Luna faded, Ian felt himself rising, cradled in silver arms, borne up by gossamer wings. The faerie's silver-clad face did not look the least bit human—it was shaped more like a wolf's snout. Not that it made an angstrom's difference to Ian. The dead don't care who gets them.

Nothing beats going to bed dead and waking up alive. Ian lay on his back, eyes closed, feeling the moon's feeble pull. Air moved in and out of his lungs. Somewhere, water was dripping. In a burst of panic, he realized that his helmet was off, his suit unsealed, exposing face and chest to vacuum. Groping wildly, he tried to close his suit.

"Human, quit batting the air and *breathe* it."

Ian lowered his arms. Shadows flickered against stone high overhead. He lay in a huge cave lit by hundreds of stubby wax candles. Dark air tasted cool and musty. A caninelike humanoid crouched next to him. Ian's first impression was "wolf," then "hyena," but the beast was not nearly so close akin to him. It was a xeno—an Eridani Hound, human-sized, vaguely baboon-shaped, with dark beady eyes and tufted audio antenna set on either side of a short snout. Twin rows of white fangs showed through parted lips. The Hound's body was hidden by silver fabric; a hooded mask hung to one side; rainbow wings covered with solar cells sprouted from the beast's shoulders. A standard speakbox rested on the Hound's silver chest.

Lounging beside the Hound was a human, a man with the face of a blond, blue-eyed faerie king—handsome, devil-may-care features that screamed biosculpt. His silver body suit showed off nearly sixteen stone of muscle and bone to stunning effect. Neither of them were Loonies. Loonies looked like the "before" holos advertising a cheap health spa—the man was too well-built, and the dog came from the far side of Human Space.

"Clive Barrow," the muscular faerie said, giving Ian a relaxed two-finger salute. He jerked a thumb at the wolf. "A Hound. He doesn't figure he needs a human name."

The xeno's six-digit hand keyed his speakbox. "Howdy, human," drawled the box, "welcome to the Wolf Pack."

Ian looked around. The gravity felt right, but everything else was wrong. He was lying in a vast limestone cavern—Tom and Becky's cave, transported from Hannibal, Missouri, to the moon. Stalactites hung down from the cave vault, and massive stalagmites rose up from the floor, some meeting halfway to form tremendous flowing columns, like pillars of half-frozen ice cream. From far off came the drip, drip of falling water,



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and the high, faint squeak of bats. The leather-winged rodents flitted back and forth in the candle light. Little blackish-brown vampire bats—Ian could picture their evil beady eyes and bright fangs.

"Where the hell am I?"

"Luna." The Hound hit a dictionary key: "Earth's largest natural satellite, 3,500 kilometers in diameter, surface grav . . . "

Clive cut in, "And your name is Ian MacNeil. From the Outer Hebrides—Earth. Today is Tuesday, Greenwich time. Does that help?"

Aside from the short personal bio, none of this made the least sense. There were no vampire bats on the moon. There was no air for them to fly in. No mammalian blood to feed on. Nor did lunar caves have stalactites or stalagmites, which are caused by water seeping through limestone—the moon being bone-dry. *Mare Imbrium* was a sea in name only. Luna does not even have *limestone,* which is formed from the remains of ancient marine creatures pressed to stone.

Ian's senses were plainly on a drug-induced holiday, but that did not stop him from feeling better, overwhelmingly better—on top of the world. Or at least, on top of the moon. Instead of worrying over where the bats came from, Ian marveled at how really superb life was, picturing summer afternoons off the Hebrides. White sails on the water. Sea turning sunset colors, copper-red and deep lilac. He remembered the devilishly beautiful stewardess who had served him dinner aboard the shuttle. Ian felt as happy as if she had whispered, "When we land, let's rent a futon and fuck," instead of merely saying, "Have a nice stay."

Insanely thankful for his second shot at life, Ian babbled on about how glad and grateful he was. . . .

"How grateful?" asked the Hound.

"Could you put it in money terms?" Clive suggested.

"Well, really, really grateful. I feel like an absolute fool. . . ."

"Humans often are," observed the xeno. "Did you know that your intake valve was clamped *down?"*

Ian gave a guilty nod. "I was saving air."

The Hound's speakbox chuckled. Clive wagged an admonishing finger, "Boy, ya gotta breathe *now,* not next week!"

Ian laughed with them, looking off into the deep recesses of the cave—the gallery above seemed to go on forever. "Where *do* these bats come from?"

Clive looked at the Hound. "Bats? What bats?"

"Human's hallucinating," concluded the Hound.

Okay, I'm cracking up, thought Ian. Can you blame me? The last few hours had been enlightening. Ian now knew that humans were never meant to leave Earth; since his first ancestors wiggled free of the anaerobic slime, they had been adapting to live in the open air—and nowhere else. The ease with which Luna could kill you was eerie. You could suffocate in vacuum, drown in $CO_2$, be bent by nitrogen, OD on oxygen, freeze in the shade, or fry in the sun. Slow falls could puncture your suit. Flash fires could turn you to toast. Or a tiny lapse in shielding



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could let in a particle of hard radiation, carrying the seed of inoperable cancer that would cream you twenty years down the line, when *la Luna* was merely a memory.

Outrageous. Unfair. Such casual deadliness made staying alive cheerless drudgery; checking and double-checking, looking before each step, always having healthy margins of everything. *Being good all the time.* With no slack for daydreaming, or just enjoying the moonscape.

Nothing had properly prepped Ian for this, not 3V, not the shuttle ride, not the stewardess' "Have a nice stay." Instinctively, he reached into his open suit for the return ticket, wanting to touch the plastic promise that there was a shuttle berth set to take him home.

The ticket was gone. Ian sat bolt upright. His sweat-soaked pocket was empty. No ticket. No ID. No credit key. He glanced about. Neither of his rescuers were looking his way. "Where's my stuff?"

"Stuff?" Clive lifted an eyebrow. "What stuff?" The Hound's evil grin broadened a millimeter or two. Xenos have a beast's ability to observe without making eye contact.

"The stuff in my pocket. My ID. Credit key. Shuttle ticket?"

"We took 'em." Clive patted a small packet adhering to his silver ribs. It was no great admission. Who else could have emptied his pocket? Ian calculated furiously. Weird as these two were, they had saved his life, and he hated to tangle with them. Clive had height and weight on him, and the Hound looked inhumanly strong. The ID was replaceable, he could spare the credit, but he had to have that prepaid ticket.

"You're sort of like salvage," Clive explained. "Unwritten law says we get half—and unwritten law's got to be strictly obeyed, since there's no one to enforce it."

The fare home was more than Ian made in a year. If anyone cashed the ticket, or used it to disappear dirtside, he might as well never come back. "Hey, I don't mind splitting with you—you deserve some *reasonable* reward—but I have to have that ticket home."

The xeno set his speakbox to extra harsh, "Human, a minute or two more, and we wouldn't be dickering. We'd have had that ticket, along with a slew of body parts and valuable bio-implants, while the rest of you did dust to dust in an organics dump."

Clive grinned amiably, "Absolutely—you can't thank us *enough*. Without air, you don't have a ticket *nowhere*. Not even out the door. If you think you can do better, then get up and go. Just reseal the lock when you leave."

What lock? Ian saw no sign of a cave entrance.

"Look," Clive reflected, "what real use is half a ticket? Shuttle's not going to take you *halfway* to Earth. The only way for a fair and even split was to make you a full, 100 percent, voting member of the Wolf Pack."

"What's the Wolf Pack?"

His ignorance provoked pitying looks. Clive turned to the Hound. "Claims he never heard of the Wolf Pack."



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The Hound gave his shoulders an exaggerated shake, as if to say, "Your stupid species."

"*We* are the Wolf Pack," Clive explained. "What's left of her."

The Hound stared up between the hanging stalactites, looking past the limestone roof. "Would say the jumpbug is just about *due*."

Clive produced Ian's helmet from behind him. "There's a motion on the floor that we suit up and meet the jumpbug. All in favor?"

"Opposed," objected Ian. "I vote you give me my stuff and show me the way back to my rover."

Clive shrugged. "Sorry, I got to go with the xeno. That's a two-thirds majority—motion passed and veto-proof. Want a recount?"

"No. This isn't fair."

"Hell, *no!* It's *democracy*." Clive pulled his silver hood over his head, handing the helmet to Ian. "You're gonna love being a Loonie."

The Hound thumbed a switch sitting incongruously on a stalagmite, and the cave vanished, bats and all. Ian found himself sitting in a transparent half bubble, pitched under an overhang at the edge of an extensive *mare*.

Clive pointed a silver finger, "Gotcha!"

The whole cavern had been a 3V holoprojection. The air holding the bubble taut no longer tasted cool and musty, turning flat and metallic. The 3V had been good. Feelie quality.

The Hound pulled on his own hood and unplugged a seal. Air spilled into the void. As the bubble collapsed, Ian set an amateur indoor record for donning a helmet and sealing a suit. Untangling himself from the deflating shelter, he stepped out onto the Sea of Showers, the vast lava plain connecting the *Oceanus Procellarum* to the Sea of Serenity—carved out four billion years ago by the Rhode Island-sized rock that gave the Man-in-the-Moon his right eye.

Earth hung overhead, nearly full, bigger by far than the fullest moon. White cloud torrents streamed across blue seas. So much air, so much life! You never knew what a blue-white jewel Earth was until you saw her from the surface of her dead sister.

Ian had a full million complaints, questions, and accusations—none of which could be voiced. His comlink was still out, and there was no point shouting into vacuum. Clive and the xeno were a few meters off, wings full extended, pulling in afternoon sunlight, the collapsed shelter tucked casually under Clive's arm. Neither of them looked his way. Ian could hardly run off. He had to stand anxiously checking his oxygen —with his helmet valve wide open, pouring final seconds of air into the suit.

A point of fire appeared overhead, growing larger, outshining Jupiter, then Earth. Waiting on an open *mare* for an incoming lander can be uncanny. The jumpbug appeared to be coming down right on top of them, aiming to grind them into the regolith.

At the last instant, the angle of descent steepened and the jumpbug came down a short ways off, raising a fiery red cloud of dust and exhaust



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gases. The lander looked old and boxy, a three-legged spider with porthole eyes. "Little Deuce Coup" was stenciled in white across the lock door.

Ian hustled for the lock. Hustle did not mean run, but sort of a fast shuffle, leaning far forward—in Luna's light gravity, it was always a long way to the ground. The others beat him easily. Clive let the xeno cycle through, then made an "after you" motion. Ian took the rungs two at a time, diving into the lock. The outer door closed behind him.

As the little chamber filled with air, Ian tore off his suffocating helmet, happy to breathe whatever the jumpbug offered. Through the tiny square window on the hatch cover, he caught sight of Clive backing off—Ian's first hint that he and the Hound were making this jump alone.

He felt the soft shudder of paired oxy-hydrogen engines, muffled by insulation and lunar vacuum. Acceleration replaced gravity. Too much had happened too quickly. Too much was *still* happening. Ian watched Luna drop away—taking his ID, his credit key, his ticket home, and the rented rover he had no hope of returning. Meanwhile, he was sealed in a hurtling metal box, headed fast for who-knows-where. Music rattled out of a pair of scratchy speakers—Radio Ganymede again. Jolly King Jove had given way to the *Callisto Tabernacle Choir,* coming in a cappella, with "Higher than the Angels" and other hits of the last century:

*Flying higher than the Angels,*
*In the heavens so free,*
*I hear the sinners a sighin',*
*"Why me Lord? Why me?"*

HOUSTON: Watch for a lovely girl with a big rabbit.

APOLLO 11: (Static) Say what?

HOUSTON: Legend says a beautiful Chinese girl named Chango is living on the moon. Been there four thousand years. Should be easy to spot. (Static) Companion is a large Chinese rabbit standing on his hind legs in the shade of a cinnamon tree. (Static) Name of the rabbit not recorded.

APOLLO 11: Check. Keep a lookout for the bunny girl.

*Little Deuce Coup*

Prying open the inner pressure door, Ian wormed his way between blue propellant tanks into the jumpbug's command cabin, a cramped metal closet, old and awkward. Modern shuttles and mass conversion ships hid their guts behind hardwood paneling and plush carpets, but here tubing snaked around vents, electronics bays, and indicator boards. Two huge trapezoidal view ports dominated the clutter, showing bright slices of Luna's sunside. Glare and interior lights blanked even the



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brightest stars, and the sole feeling of flight came from the double throb of oxy-hydrogen engines.

The Hound was in the far couch, half-hidden by the combustion chamber cowling. The near acceleration couch was empty. The command couch sat atop the cowling, with the primary axis of thrust running straight through the seat of the pilot's pants—if the pilot were wearing pants. From where Ian stood, the pilot seemed to be wearing nothing. A smooth, bare leg sprawled alongside the high definition screen, relaxed and professional, heel nestled comfortably in a crook of the optical alignment mount. Nearest to Ian was a nude shoulder, and a head of short-cropped hair, dark as the starless night outside. The pilot was saying something to the xeno, so Ian could not see her face. He stood there feeling hugely overdressed, swathed in layers of nylon fabric and spun silicone.

She turned abruptly. "Welcome aboard, stranger. Where ya headed?"

Ian was too struck to answer. The pilot's face had deep natural lines, untouched by biosculpting. It was not an ugly face—merely the face of a woman who had lived long and worked hard without the benefit of chemo-surgical cosmetics—something you seldom saw on the Dirtside dating circuit. But what hit him was her tattoo. A diamondback rattler covered the right half of her face, rattles touching the corner of her mouth, body coiling up her cheek and arching over her eyebrow—the gaping mouth and thin curved fangs filling her right forehead, ready to strike. Not another pretty face.

"Name's Angel O'Ferrall." Her upsun accent was smooth as cream and honey. Looking down at her bare body, she laughed, "Well, pardon my tits. I didn't know I had to put on panties to pick up a pecker-headed Hound." She nodded toward the far seat. "Xenos don't give a damn what you wear—or look like. Ain't got human feelings."

The Hound's speakbox made noises of grateful agreement.

Angel bent forward, snagging a black top draped over the doppler hood. While she struggled into the synthetic fabric, Ian managed to introduce himself, finding it easier to talk to her bare back and shoulder blades than to that rattlesnake tattoo. Angel straightened up, pulling the black top down to her waist. "Hound and I are headed for Lagrange Farside," she explained. "Sure hope you were, too."

Lagrange Farside was an empty point in space teetering at the edge of the Earth-Moon system—farther than ever from where Ian needed to be. "Good God, no! Why the Hell would . . . "

She silenced him with a snakey look. "We got business, there. Private business. If you're not headed for Lagrange Farside, why are you tagging after the Hound?"

Private business? Ian could easily believe it. He did not want to know more, hoping to stay as clean and innocent as possible. Angel would hardly be burning reactant mass merely to give some canine ET a get-acquainted look at the Earth-Moon system. Clive and the Hound had larceny punched all over them—having offhandedly robbed Ian of everything worth taking. Angel looked only an angstrom more honest. It was



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hardly in Ian's best interest to know the details of whatever criminal alien-smuggling enterprise he had tumbled onto.

He felt nervously compelled to assure Angel that he was exactly what he seemed—a hapless law-abiding tourist gone astray. He hastily told his whole story. How he had come up from Terra to do an onsite inspection of a new-style mass conversion furnace—then set out on some private lunar exploration. He had rented a suit and rover from a tourist shop in Copernik North—in retrospect, a ghastly mistake—but "My God, I was on the moon!"

Ian had wanted to do a Neil Armstrong, heading off into the unknown. Or at least the unvisited. The Lunar Carpathians had scores of unclimbed peaks. He merely meant to stand on a virgin summit, mentally naming the mountain for himself. Where else in the Earth-Moon system could you put your footprint where no fool had ever tread? Luna made Antarctica look grossly overpopulated—a bubbled tourist trap with polluted ice and hordes of tiny panhandlers in tuxedos. But the vendor had been your typical Loonie, a spindly little weasel—sending him off in a terminally defective suit with a smile and a hearty clap on the back. (That got a chuckle of sympathy from Angel.) He had gotten lost (outright laughter). And rescued (applause from the Hound's speakbox). And *robbed* (mixed laughter and applause).

"Sounds like Luna." Angel shook her head. "Always pays to see Lady Selene at a distance. I purely do want to hear the finish of this *really funny* story, but I got to do a bit of piloting." Angel cut her throttle, reaching down for the attitude controller between her legs, playing with her thrusters. Roll. Yaw. Then counter thrusts. Farside swung into view, filling the jumpbug's ports. She cut her thrusts. They were in freefall. Farside was in half phase, and they were falling past the sunlit half, seeing the pockmarked plain in maximum contrast. Craters lay on top of craters. No dark *maria* here. The broad ancient lava seas were all on Nearside, facing earth's pull, created by tidal action. Farside was a tortured moonscape of secondary and tertiary impacts, dominated by the big bull's eye of Orientale Basin.

"Gorgeous, isn't she?" sighed Angel. The Hound's speakbox pounded out a rolling crescendo, the intro riff from "Great Wall of Galaxies" by *Gas and Dust*.

He saw Angel's features soften, the snake relaxing—charmed by music and moon magic—no longer about to strike, becoming merely a bizarre and intricate design inked into a woman's face. She gave her shoulders a wistful shake, *"La Luna* and Big Blue are the best reasons to come downsun."

Ian shrugged, "I'd trade my next ten-dozen looks for a ticket to Earth." With each passing second he slid farther from his home in the Hebrides.

"Can't take you to Earth," she told him. "Not if Big Blue still has that steep gravity well and soupy atmosphere. My bug would fuckin' fly apart before we hit bottom."

Angel considered for a moment, "I *could* drop you off in low orbit, at



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a factory or research station—wouldn't be hard to hitch a ride Dirtside from there."

Ian calculated. The jumpbug might make it down to low orbit, stripped and carrying only two people. Definitely not the way he wanted to return—Ian far preferred the shuttle's air cushion couches, elixir bar, and inflight entertainments (feelies, 3V gaming, and maneuvering nimble flight attendants into semi-private berths). But . . .

"It'll cost," Angel added. "Have to burn like hell to get there, then refuel in low orbit. Give you a straight freight deal—fuel plus 10 percent trouble and overhead. Course, it'd be cheaper to drop you on Farside, or even to take you around to Tycho or Armstrong Station."

Cheaper *maybe,* but any return to Luna was a step backward. Ian hadn't half a chance of finding Clive, and without his ticket, he'd be at the mercy of the Loonies. The scrawny bastards would be thrilled to send him home, charitably billing his agency double or triple for room, board, travel, damages to the suit and rover, use of the lavatory, and for every deep breath he took. Loonies were adept at wringing a living out of visiting Dirtsiders. Going back down to the moon dead broke, with no ticket home, would be like slitting his wrist in a shark tank and ringing the dinner bell. Much as he might enjoy a chance at force-feeding his virus-ridden suit to that Copernik shopkeeper—Ian needed to get home. On Earth, he could file a claim for the lost ticket and credit, suing the tourist shop in a Dirtside court, charging fraud, punitive damages, and outrageous pain and suffering.

Angel looked him over, "I'd have to know how you planned to pay."

Ian hedged. "I can pay. But I would need to contact my agency, arranging some reasonable compensation . . . "

She cut him short, "This bug does not run on promises, reasonable or otherwise." Angel patted a panel with affectionate intimacy. "Only solid reactant mass is gonna change your vector."

Ian glared at the Hound lounging in the far couch. The xeno knew he was good for the nut, but was saying nothing. Not taking sides.

Angel bent forward, "Got more flying to do." Main thrusters burped. The jumpbug pitched and yawed. Ian had to grab a handhold to keep from rattling about like a bean in a box. Farside slid back behind them. Their destination swung into view. Lagrange Farside is the farthest libration point in the Earth-Moon system, a spot where a ship's fall around the Earth exactly balances its fall around Luna, leaving the ship at rest relative to those two bodies. (Nothing ever stops relative to everything.) Even this limited stability is an illusion—the least displacement gives the Earth or moon an advantage, causing the ship to fall away from the libration point. It was an inherently unstable location that Ian had never dreamed of visiting.

There was a lone ship orbiting the Lagrange point, looking like a three-bladed exhaust fan, slowly rotating in space. Judging size is difficult against a dimensionless black backdrop, where even the stars seem small, but Ian figured the ship had to be fairly big, and quite old, powered


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by solar collectors married to a fusion reactor. The one or two rpm rotation was a rube goldberg gravity simulator, using circular motion to create internal acceleration.

Angel did a neat job of docking, sliding the jumpbug's stubby lock into a port on the ship's main axis. Ian felt a slight bump. Locks opened automatically and they were joined. Freefall returned. Through the cabin ports, Ian could see kilometers of slowly rotating solar collectors, their flat surfaces pitted by micrometeors.

Angel kicked off the control console, flipping with knees tucked into a tight back somersault, ending up in *demi-plié* at the lock entrance—a neat bit of zero-*g* gymnastics, proving she knew every millimeter of the cabin. The tight black top came only to her waist, dividing her neatly in half, adding to her mystery—half of her was dark and remote, topped by her menacing tattoo, the other half of her was unclad, open, even enticing. Unembarrassed by semi-nudity, she slid past Ian, entering the big ship through the open lock, vanishing into the revolving hatch of a de-spin system—not bothering to look back.

Ian dived after her disappearing rump, unwilling to be left aboard the jumpbug with only a big ugly xeno for company. As soon as he had joined her in the de-spin system, Angel reached up and banged the inner hatch shut, saying, "Room for two. The Hound can take the next drop."

They began to fall toward the tip of the solar panels. Weight built up. Angel looked him over, head cocked, deliberately showing the profile not disfigured by her tattoo. By now, Ian was used to this trick. She would flick the snake back toward him whenever she wanted to shock. "You're really damned cute," she decided. "Do you have a body to match that face? Earth men usually do." This was all challenge and bravado. She *knew* there was no chance of Ian taking advantage of her at close quarters, not when he was suited up tighter than Sir Galahad.

The capsule thumped to a stop at somewhere near two-thirds standard gravity. Angel kicked open the deck hatch with her heel. Humid misty air steamed into the capsule. She swung her bare legs over the lip and dropped through the hatch. Ian followed, struggling to compensate for coriolis effect, and his bulky suit.

He landed in a photosynthetic greenhouse. Vines clung to the bulkheads. Wavering illumination and light gravity made Ian feel like he was standing on the bottom of a weed-choked pool. A brown pigmy goat stared curiously up at him from amid the undergrowth.

"Mind the goat shit." Angel pushed aside some creepers, exposing another pressure hatch. "And take off that suit. You'll be so much more comfortable." She slipped through the hatch, again without a backward glance.

Ian unsealed as quickly as he could, opening the pressure suit down to one knee like a pair of kid's pajamas. Stepping free of the suit, he stuffed it into the open hatch above him, to keep the elevator lock from closing. With the hatch held open, tons of air pressure kept the elevator


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capsule from returning for the Hound. The xeno might as well be back in the Eridani.

Proud of his ingenuity, Ian swaggered after Angel. Now it was him and her. No clumsy suit. No freefall antics. No superhuman Hound. Earth-trained muscles in two-thirds *g* made him feel strong and agile, and very much in control. For the first time since getting lost, things would go his way. Angel had her bold talk and brash habits—but he had the law behind him (or what passed for law on Luna). She had to cooperate—and at least punch through a call to Earth—or be an accessory to robbery and kidnapping. He opened the pressure hatch, prepared to be firm but reasonable.

The inner cabin was free of vines and creepers. Instead, a great stone eye stared sideways at him. As Ian stepped through the hatch, the bulkhead behind him turned into sand dunes, rising and falling beneath a cloudless sky. He saw that the eye belonged to a colossal face, half-buried in desert sand. Ian recognized the face at once. It was Ramses II. Beside it stood two tall trunkless legs of stone.

It was, of course, a projection, hiding the real decks and bulkheads behind an 3V image of the broken monument of Ramses II. Not a true image either. (Ian had seen the real thing, flanked by a ruined temple complex, rent-a-camel stands, and tourist shops.) It was a projection of Ramses' fallen statue *as Shelley pictured it* in his poem "Ozymandias":

> *Nothing beside remains. Round the decay*
> *Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare*
> *The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

But it was every bit as good as the bat cave. He could taste hot barren air, and hear the *sirocco* moaning off the dunes. Flecks of illusionary sand struck his face.

Beneath Ian's feet was a brightly colored Persian carpet, stretched flat. Angel sat crosslegged on the big embroidered rug, filling china cups with tea from a brass samovar. Ian guessed that only the rug and tea set were real, everything else was sensory illusion. Determined not to be impressed, he sat down, taking an offered cup.

"So, you cannot pay for a trip home, or even the drop to Farside?" As Angel spoke, the rug began to rise. Rameses' face and legs sank out of sight. Dunes dwindled. The carpet took off, winging over sunlit waste.

"I cannot pay for anything," Ian admitted, trying to ignore the desertscape unrolling below.

"A lot of us up here are in that income bracket."

"Come on, how much could it cost to punch a signal through to Terra for me?"

Angel considered. "If I did put a signal through, would they come to get you? And arrest the Hound?"

"I hope so." Ian heard caravan bells tinkling on the wind. A line of


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camels plodded nose to tail beneath them, casting dramatic shadows over the plain.

She shook her head. "No good. I need that xeno. Right now there is a Gypsy Mother Ship in a decaying orbit around Neptune, in terminal need of repairs. Everyone aboard is in desperate trouble—and that xeno is my link to credit that can save them."

Jesus, a Gyp. It made a sick sort of sense. The antique equipment. Angel's brash talk. And the Arabian Nights 3V show. Gyps lived their whole lives between cramped decks. Illusions like this kept them just this side of being psychotically claustrophobic. They were as witless as Loonies, and twice as wild, with a fine disregard for the rights and opinions of Dirtsiders. Ian was going to have to work hard to get her sympathy. "Look," he protested, "I can't think flying about like Ali Baba. Land this rug."

The carpet picked up speed. A double line of palms poked over the horizon, marking a pair of rivers. Harun-al-Rashid's Baghdad hove into sight. The carpet descended, just clearing the huge circular walls. Banking between tall minarets, they flashed over sweating porters at dockside and crowds haggling in the bazaars, making straight for Harun's domed and turreted palace at the heart of the city. Swooping into the palace precincts, the carpet slid under an ornate portico, coming to rest in a sunlit harem court.

Women and girls lounging under citron trees beside a rosewater fountain played with dwarf deer and an ape with a gold collar. Tough-looking eunuchs guarded the pointed doorways. Angel's fantasies had casts of thousands and vivid detail. Ian could hear the deer's tiny silver horse shoes clicking on the tiles. She set down her tea cup. "You're a Dirtsider. Check?"

"I thought I said that?"

"Got a job?"

"Yes, I told you . . . "

"Pension, paid vacations, health plan . . . "

"Well, sure."

" . . . and dental plan?"

"I don't see . . . "

"Clearly not a charity case. I got *none* of those. My problems are all cash and carry—yours don't impress me much. People *depend* on me. Oldsters and babies who don't have agency grants or pension funds. If their ship isn't fixed, they will all die when the orbit decays."

"That sounds harsh, surely . . . " Ian groped about for a solution, but no easy one came to mind.

"Harsh? Hell, it's just *gravity*. And gravity's the *law*—it keeps the system together. Can't bitch about that. But with that Hound's help, we can afford to fix the ship."

"Why is this Hound so precious? They are more obnoxious than rare."

"We mean to enter him in the Great Games at Tycho."

*Gamers*. My God! Why couldn't Angel and the Hound have been into



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something sane and sensible, like credit fraud, or hijacking interstellar liners? "No one wins at gaming," he protested.

"The Wolf Pack does!" Angel's rattlesnake seemed to leap out, reminding Ian how often gaming addiction went with disfigurement—a deepseated distaste for mere flesh, even your own.

Despite being a hundred percent voting member of the Wolf Pack, Ian hadn't the least faith in this phantom organization. "From what I've seen, I wouldn't stake a microcredit on them, much less my sanity." Gaming was the most insidious, dangerous addiction ever invented. Ian liked his brain undegraded.

"They've won before." Angel's eyes glittered with the gambler's fallacy—because something had happened once, it had to happen again. "Turning that Hound over to the law is a null program. No payout. He's a xeno. No clothes. No pockets in his moonsuit. The only way he could have your ID and ticket is if he ate them."

She leaned forward, putting her whole body into her plea. "Forget your crummy little job. We're going to hit a *sweepstakes* jackpot! Getting rich by doing good. Saving you, and saving my ship. I'll see you fly back to Earth in style. A private shuttle. Your own orbital yacht!"

"And if we *lose?*" Addicts never considered that—they were hooked on the game itself. Earth had millions of feelie addicts, but there the disease was more or less under control, with clinics to help you kick, cut back, or live with the addiction. On Tycho, things were wide open. Addicts were soaked until their credit went sour, and the gaming casinos owned them—body and soul. "God, why can't you guys earn an *honest* living!"

Angel laughed, "This is absolutely the most legal thing Clive has ever done. And win or lose, I'll *personally* make it worth your while."

No need to ask how. The fountain was pouring out some hellish pheromone, jacking his hormones into overdrive—reminding Ian *why* the Caliphs built these perfumed harem courts. In case he somehow missed the message, the houris began to strip and bathe, splashing rosewater over each other's breasts and thighs, engaging in erotic play, while caged birds broke into a chorus of "Sheherazade."

Ian fought to shake off the spell. "This is mad. And illegal. And I am not going *near* Tycho."

"Look, I'm giving you a hundred percent free choice." Angel leaned back, letting him look her over. "You can come *with me* to Tycho. Or I'll have Tiny sit on you until the Hound and I come back rich and happy."

"Tiny?"

She pointed her chin, flashing the snake, indicating the gold-collared ape in the garden, the only male member in the lesbian garden party. This was the problem with gamers, they found it impossible to tell illusion from reality. It would take more than a 3V gorilla to terrorize Ian into obeying. "I'm going to insist on you bouncing a call to Terra off one of the Lagrange stations."

Angel smiled and snapped her fingers. The ape shambled away from



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his playmates, stepping onto the carpet. A moment later, Tiny was towering over Ian, looking like the colossus of Ramses come to life. Clearly this was a real three-hundred-kilo SuperChimp, able to stuff Ian into his tea cup. "Tiny or me, take your pick." Angel looked him straight in the face, half woman, half snake. "Either way, I promise not to be insulted."

The lady or the behemoth? Ian had little choice. Tycho might be a first class brain-fuck, but it beat hanging about Lagrange farside with Tiny for his keeper. There was no way he would stay here, not even if Harun's harem were real and ready to indulge him.

He threw up both hands. "Okay, let's take Tycho apart!"

Angel's congratulations were interrupted by an insistent rapping on one of the harem gates. A bored eunuch drew his scimitar and opened the cedarwood door, revealing a plasti-metal airlock, full of EVA gear and deflated pressure suits. The Hound stepped out in full silver suit, having obviously just climbed several kilometers of solar paneling to reach the living quarters. "The capsule did not come back," his speakbox complained. "Some witless human jammed the elevator lock."

*Hail Caesar, we who are* not *about to die salute you.*
*—Motto of the* Circuit Maximus

*The Great Games*

Smack, crack, crank, speed, booze, acid, hash, bhang, poppies, and belladonna; none of the above (or all of them taken at once) had even half the addictive power of gaming. As proof of that, all these drugs (and a hundred others) were offered free or *at cost* to customers by the gaming palaces in Tycho. Not to *compete* with gaming—which could never be done—but to provide a relaxing come-down between sets, taking the edge off tattered neurons.

Angel set the jumpbug down just inside Tycho's massive ringwall, amid long afternoon shadows. Like a lot of inhabited Luna, the landing-field looked really low-rent, tramped-over, scarred by blast craters and crawler tracks. Posh automated pressure vehicles scuttled out to greet them, like great scavenger beetles competing for a fresh cadaver. Each sported the logo of a different gaming palace. Angel picked the one marked *Circuit Maximus,* and they were piped aboard by a corny, full-orchestra version of *"Also Spracht Zarathustra."* Ian pointed out that this was pure hype, to impress the marks, setting them up for plucking.

Angel waved off his sour attitude. "Of *course* it's a shuck—so lie back and *enjoy it."*

He gave in, settling back on a plush sofa facing the forward viewport. Angel snuggled next to him. The Hound sat hunched on the deck, visibly bored by human luxury. Tiny wedged himself into a plastic seat, like



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King Kong trying not to fill a small living room. Through crystal vacuum, Ian could count the notches on the crater's central peak. Tycho was only a couple of billion years old, blasted out by a flying mountain somewhat smaller than the one that had carved Copernicus. The gaming palaces were perched on the central massif. The surrounding crater floor was graded like a giant Japanese rock garden, covering-over centuries of crawler tracks. A massive pillar and lintel shrine stood over a small black depression, dedicated to the *Dharma Bum* and her passengers.

The crawler rolled right up to a private lock, to keep *Circuit Maximus* from losing customers to another casino. They disembarked directly into the autobar and gaming area, done up to resemble a Roman forum. Holos made the place look huge, throbbing to the beat of "Nero's Treat," by *Smug and Insincere.*

A tasteless triumphal arch opened onto a 3V arcade blazing with simulated life. "Come this way!" it shouted. "Choose from HUNDREDS OF ALIEN WORLDS—fight WILD BEASTS in the sun-scorched ARENA, win the SLAVE MAIDEN caged overhead—TAKE HER on the burning sand!" Ian could tell by the frantic appeal that the arcade booths must be nearly empty. Such synthetic vice was amusing enough in its own robust way—especially if you lacked the energy and imagination to jerk-off on your own—but it could never compare to the Great Games. The real action did not begin until you plugged in.

Demi-gods in tights and togas and women with impossible tinsel-wrapped figures were having such a raucous good time that they had to be shills or holos. As soon as Ian passed up the penny-ante arcade, a suave majordomo stepped forward with a wave and a bow. He was a Loonie, with spindly limbs and the distant unflappable smile of a feelie addict. Minor employees were almost always Virtual Reality junkies, endlessly working off their debts to the casino.

Ian ordered up a room, only to find Clive had already rented them a suite. Angel's bold tattoo, Tiny the SuperChimp, and the outlandish xeno did not get so much as a blink. Clearly nothing happening in the here-and-now could possibly compare to this Loonie's off-hours. Ian suspected that he could have spit in the majordomo's face, and the smile would not have wavered. It was impossible to annoy someone who was merely going through the motions of life—in his spare time he could easily be Caligula or Kublai Khan, lord of some synthetic Xanadu, with a seraglio of nubile young houris and painted boys waiting for him to plug in. Greeting the public was so many hours of hum-drum, endurable so long as it paid for his pleasure. It would have taken a plasma torch between the man's toes to get more than a polite, "Right this way."

Angel took Tiny to their suite. Ian went with the Hound to inspect the gaming arena, a steep high-tech pit smelling of blood and sand, surrounded by pillowed couches and low tables. Two towering holos rose out of the center of the pit, ten meters tall, and sweating under an indoor sun. A huge *retiarius,* armed with fish net and trident, stalked an amazon *samnite* in half armor, who was defending herself with an oblong shield


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and Spanish short sword. The female holo limped from a leg wound, and a ribbon of blood cut across the *retiarius'* muscular chest.

The phantom combat got scant attention from prospective gamers crowded around the pit, huddled in groups and pairs, striking deals, debating tactics, or going over map displays of nineteenth century Africa and medieval Transylvania. Tables were spread with a typical Loonie tourist buffet: curried bulgar and garbanzos, a three-fungus salad, peppered leeks, *champignons farcis,* and edible pond algae. Every so often, someone would look past the giant gladiators, glancing at the hexagonal display floating overhead, getting a readout on games in progress.

Ian noted that most of the games were now closed competitions, of interest only to touts and gamblers. A Renaissance Italy team elimination was down to a dozen pairs, stalking each other with stilettos and poison cups through the back alleys and banquets of fair Verona. In the Arthurian tourney, Lancelot looked to be mopping up. Gawain and Galahad trailed in the standings. Tristram and Mordred had been eliminated by a bad fall and a broken lance. Bedivere remained a long shot at 20 to 1. Of the open heats, the Cape to Cairo rally had yet to begin, and attention focused on the Grand Luna Sweepstakes, still accepting latecomers at bargain rates. A timer showed that the moon over Dracula's Castle was waxing, nearly full.

The base of the hexagonal display bore a cheery warning—ALL OUTCOMES ARE FINAL.

Clive came strolling through the crowd, dressed as a blond Alcibiades in a gold toga, its purple border trailing behind him. He paused several times to listen in on strategy sessions, exchanging comments, sometimes aloud, sometimes in a stage whisper. When he got to Ian, he clapped him on the shoulder. "Perfect timing—I've entered us in the Sweepstakes. We go in at 0700."

A gawky sharp-faced Loonie with slick black hair and a spade beard slid up, looking furtively from side to side. Clive introduced the Loonie, saying "This is Philaemos, but you can call him Phil—he's on our side, I think."

Phil nodded eagerly. "Until the Castle."

"Until the Castle," Clive said, and laughed.

Ian knew that alliances and conspiracies were an integral part of team competitions. But once you plugged in, anything was fair; surprise, duplicity, and betrayal were standard tactics. The sweepstakes competition had a single prize, "The Vampire's Heart," a blood-red ruby hidden away in the heavily defended tower of Dracula's Castle. Each team could increase its chances by cooperating with the others—until the Castle was breached, or an advantageous double-cross presented itself. But whoever seized the ruby was sole winner of the accumulated credit—minus the casino's cut.

Phil looked warily about, "The White Company has put out a call for allies."



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Clive looked up at the display. "Of course, they got waxed in the opening rounds. Well, tell 'em the Wolf Pack's back."

Phil scuttled off, happy to have a confidence to betray. Clive lowered his voice. "Philaemos hangs around the pit, talking up games he hasn't the credit to enter. People call him Phil the Shill, but he's pretty harmless, unless you happen to trust him."

The White Company did not look much like Conan Doylé's band of chivalric adventurers; clumped together at one end of the arena, their casino togas haphazardly arranged, they looked more like a load of soiled laundry. The only thing *Roman* about them was the hollow-eyed Romulus and Remus look—abandoned at birth and suckled by wolves. One of them growled at the Hound, "This table's for humans."

Clive flashed a smile. "He's not fussy."

According to the readout above, the White Company had already been overrun by Tartars in the early innings. Ian recognized the nervous brooding of gamers at the losing end of a bad run. Several sat hunched on couches, staring past their eyebrows at the timer ticking overhead.

"Brilliant, absolutely brilliant," muttered a big blonde amazon in a man's toga. "You sure gave 'em hell, Gertrude. Screaming for mama until they slit your throat."

"No shit, Sheila. You weren't so fuckin' slick yourself." Her companion, small and dark, was dressed more like a woman in an ill-fitting Ionain chiton.

"What was I *supposed* to do? Those Tartars just creamed us, coming out of nowhere. It was hardly fair." Sheila's appeal for fairness got a grim laugh. "I mean, how can they bring in a fuckin' Kipchak killing machine from out of Central Asia just to roll over us?" There was no answer, except for the obvious one: so long as the casino stayed within the game parameters, *Circuit Maximus* could tilt the play any way it pleased. It was up to the gamers to beat the system or go away broke.

Ian looked over toward the readout, to get a fix on the time. Almost 2200. He should be resting. Or better yet, in bed with Angel.

The Hound got into a spirited argument with the *Circuit Maximus* management, absolutely refusing to go into the game in human guise, citing several treaties and insisting that his rights as an extraterrestrial were being violated—threatening to *sue*. If the casino had no provisions for ET players, he could at least go in as a dog. Any sort of human would be too degrading.

Sheila took a sharp bite out of a peppered leek. "Well next time out, I hope to see all you fuckers dying *hard*."

A man protested. "You think it was *fun* getting feathered with iron-headed arrows? Feeling yourself bleed to death?"

"Right," Sheila snorted. "Want to hear what the Kipchaks were doing to *us* while you were lying on your backs restfully bleeding to death?" She nudged the smaller woman, "Gertrude, *tell* 'em about it." Gertrude merely grunted.


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Phil the Shill took the chance to cut in. "Hell, one time I was tortured by Hurons, for *days.*"

"Hurons? This was the bloody Balkans."

White Company members blinked at him, staring as if he had lost his wits. "It was another game," Phil admitted. "But it was real bad—they had red-hot tomahawks."

"Shit, that's *nothing.*"

"God, I hope they hacked you in the crotch!"

The White Company tried to go back to their argument, but they had lost the thread. Soon everyone was comparing their most gruesome, horrendous deaths—burning, impaling, crucifixion, flaying, and dismemberment. It seemed that every form of violent, bizarre extinction had been suffered by *someone* at the table. Hollow eyes lit up. A false bravado seized hold. Whatever else had happened, they were still the goddamn White Company, and they could sure as hell take it!

Ian got up and looked around. Sicker than the stories themselves was the *way* they were told, full of verve and energy—*as if it actually mattered.* He hated to hear gamers spilling their guts, trying to sound *bad.* All it showed was how totally delusional they were. The most elemental rule of gaming was that if you die, you lose—your original stake is gone. You have to give up, or buy your way back in. This tough talk amounted to a bunch of chronic losers bucking themselves up by boasting about how badly they had lost. Somehow he had to *win.*

Disgusted by the whole show, he went to look for Angel, to get what he could out of the game—*up front.* The Wolf Pack's suite was immense—three bedrooms, two baths, a full galley, a salon and an autobar. Tiny had his own room. One of the salon walls was 3V, tuned to show an indepth surface projection of Kikku, Chi Draconis III, with its planetary ocean rolling under china-blue skies. Twin moons hung low on the watery horizon. All charged to Ian's line of credit.

Angel was wearing a green silk casino chiton and snacking on dishes brought up from the buffet downstairs. "Try the curried bulgar," she suggested. "Come tomorrow we're likely to be living on it—along with this edible pond scum."

Ever since he'd agreed to go to Tycho, she had shown him nothing but her good side. Now was the time to take advantage of that. He sat down next to her, resting his hand on her thigh. She did not flinch or draw back. Her leg felt strong and warm through the thin fabric. His fingers slid inward. Hardly suave, but he was in a hurry.

"Save it for the games," she told him. "At seven A.M. sharp, we've got to cut our way to Dracula's Castle, storm the sucker, then steal a ruby out from under some mean opposition."

Ian assured her that he'd be better able to wrestle Bulgars in the morning, if she would loosen up a bit now.

Angel turned slightly, showing only the fangs and tail of the snake. "Come morning, we are going to be in a megacredit sweepstakes competition. Bulgars will be the least of our worries. We have to beat the House.



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Beat the White Company. Beat *everybody*—you know what the odds on that are like?"

"Not good."

"Bad enough that *Circuit Maximus* is willing to bet a thousand-to-one on us fucking up—and feel sure of winning. Look around you; none of this was paid for by backing bad bets."

She held up her hand edge-on in front of her face, defining an invisible plane dividing her face down the middle, an eye on either side. By moving her hand forward, she indicated that the plane extended outward, as far as the mind could take it. "We have to walk it tight if we aim to win. No missteps, no mistakes. Our energy has to be on line. We better damn well *hum,* or my people orbiting Neptune will die. And we'll all end up losers, like those sad fuckers downstairs."

"Sure, sure, but . . . "

"No buts. Did you see that duded-up corpse that greeted us at the door? Talk about your undead, *that* was a goddamn zombie! Give the casino a week or two, you could *be him.* Totally glazed-over in some electronic Neverland. In a gaming casino, you check your sanity at the door. So don't blow it. You've got to promise me that you will *never* think it's not real."

"I promise." Ian would have promised her the whole godforsaken moon at this point. What did he have to lose?

She gave him a swift kiss on the lips. "Good. Now get some sleep. In a day or two, we'll be dodging vampires in the dark—if we're real lucky."

At 0600, the crowd in the gaming pit was gearing up for the start of the Cape-to-Cairo Rally. Tarzan wanna-bees were poring over projections of German Tanganyika, swearing in Swahili. Clive was there to prep Ian on plugging in. "Remember—go light. The Board is going to offer you all kinds of weapons, armor, and paraphernalia—tempting you to turn yourself into a walking arsenal."

"What's so bad about that?" Ian was having second and third thoughts about the whole business.

"First, you have to lug it about, and edged weapons weigh a lot. Have you ever hefted a halberd or a broad ax?"

"Not lately."

"Would you know how to use one when the time came?"

"Maybe . . . "

"Most likely, you'd never get the chance. The casino *wants* you to load up on weapons and spells, figuring you'll be blindsided before you can ever use 'em. Going in overarmed is worse than being bareassed—if you're naked, you at least feel *exposed.* You'd know to take cover and keep alert. All an arsenal does is lull you into making mistakes—it can even give you away. Have you ever *heard* someone walking in plate armor? It sounds like a convention of drunk tinkers. Are you ready to take on every Turk and Tartar who hears you coming?"

"Probably not. So what's best?"



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"Dress like a peasant," Clive advised, "with a dirk or dagger—and one distance weapon. How are you with a bow?"

"I don't know." Except for the bagpipes, Ian had never handled anything that could be called a "distance weapon."

"Try a light crossbow. They're easy to aim, and can be fired from hiding—always the preferred position."

"What about magic?"

"Way too expensive. That line of credit you came here with wasn't endless. It took your ticket and most of that credit to get this far."

"Next time, I'll do better." *Next* time, he would stay on *Terra.* "So if we lose, *Circuit Maximus* will be expecting me to pay up?"

Clive grinned, "Sounds too perfect too be true."

"Could only happen on Luna," added the Hound. He had won his tussle with the casino—happily going in as an ugly black mastiff.

Ian grinned back, secretly wishing he could flatten them both—but they easily outmassed him. Besides, he was trapped. Back out now, and *Circuit Maximus* would present him with an absolutely unpayable bill. Somehow, the Wolf Pack had to win.

Clive patted him on the back, "Just remember the Pack motto."

"What's mine is yours?"

"No," Clive laughed, "though that's a good'un. It's 'All for One and One for All.' Punch *French Crusader* so that we can go in together—and never think it's not real."

*Circuit Maximus* had a whole phoney ritual connected with plugging in—part of the casino hype, delivered at *no extra charge.* Servants stripped off Ian's toga, leading him down marble steps to a subterranean Roman bath. Light streamed down from stone vents onto pale steaming water. Here he was washed, toweled, rubbed, and scented, then escorted to his gaming compartment, as though he were a gladiator going into single-combat, the casino's champion, instead of its chump.

Gold letters decorated the Roman arch above the entry vault—DACIA, the name of Trajan's Romanian province.

Inside, lying on slabs, were rows of high-tech coffins, plasti-metal cocoons covered with tubes, circuitry and instrumentation. Inside his was a tiny human-shaped space, adjusted to Ian's size and physique. Casino flunkies helped him in, tightening the seals until the chamber fit like a surgical glove, with dermal transceivers touching every centimeter of skin. Then the chamber was screwed shut, light-tight.

He was in total darkness, silent and disorienting. Then the Board appeared. The display floated about half a meter in front of his face, listing identities, physiques, languages, arms and armor, spells and counter magic, mounts, pack animals and special equipment, each item paired with a price in credits. All had tiny red dots beside them. He could make selections by reaching up and touching the dots, turning red settings to green. His hand would not really be moving, anymore than he was actually "seeing" the board. Movement and sensation were already wired in. The Board was a projection onto his retina. Blinking



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made it go away. Opening his eyes brought it back. The decision to lift his arm and touch a setting triggered complex feedback loops that registered his choices, while stimulating his kinesthetic and pressure receptors, making him feel touch and movement.

All contestants came into the game from outside Translyvania. Identities ranged from the Khan of the Golden Horde or Osman Sultana (both hideously expensive) down through Prince Philip of Artois (merely overpriced) all the way to Crippled Beggar (the casino was willing to *give* credits to anyone who thought they could win with one leg and spastic shakes). Under *French Crusader* a double column of entries included:

| | |
|---|---|
| Jean the Fearless | Chevalier |
| Marshal Boucicaut | Esquier |
| Admiral de Vienne | Hospitaler |
| Comte Jacques de la Marche | Courtesan |
| Enguerrand de Coucy | Monk |
| Henri de Bar | Gross Valet |
| Gendarme | Crossbowman |

And so on, down to Common Whore and Scullery Knave.

The titled nobles all came with armed retinues (handy no doubt, but way out of his price range). Ian skipped over the various forms of men-at-arms, concentrating on the lowly and affordable personas at the bottom of the list. He doubted his abilities to perform as a Monk or Courtesan, but Crossbowman seemed to fit, and supplied him with the distance weapon Clive had suggested.

There was a whole list of physical features—height, weight, hair and eye color, etc. A make-over cost nothing. He could go in as handsome as Clive and hung like a god *at no extra charge.* Or as a woman, if he wanted that thrill. Something told him he would do better as he was.

The first couple of languages came cheap. French was free with the character. Magyar, German, Romany, Turkic, Yiddish, and so on could all be had at reduced prices. But the ability to plead for mercy in Mongol did not seem all that much of an edge. He selected the local Romanian dialect, which would at least let him know what the poor folks were saying.

The list of edged weapons read like a grotesque military museum catalog:

| | |
|---|---|
| Broadsword | Halberd |
| Brown Bill | Mace |
| Claymore | Pole Ax |
| Double Axe | Rapier |
| Falchion | Sabre |
| Flamberge | Scimitar |
| Gisarme | and so forth . . . |

A dirk came with the costume. The only other piece of cutlery that tempted him was a silver stiletto, for dispatching *loups-garous* and vampires, but it cost more than all the rest combined.

He lingered over the lists of spells and magics—not because he could



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afford or use them, but to get an idea of what he was up against. In general, any sort of central Balkan ghoul or beastie seemed to be allowed, everything from werebitches to bottled *djinn*. God, what a disaster this was going to be.

He punched ENTRY. Let the games begin!

*The Undead*

Ian stood on a gallows hill. A narrow rutted cartpath at his feet wound down the knoll toward an almost treeless plain, dotted with villages, each with its domed church. In the near distance, a gaily colored pavilion stood by a silver stream. Farther off was a walled town with leaden roofs, and an outlying Byzantine tower. A crossbow and quiver dug into his back.

The gaming compartment, tons of rock, Tycho, and all of Luna had vanished at the press of a button. His sole companion on this place of punishment was a mummified body, impaled from pelvis to collar bone. The half-rotted head lolled to one side, wearing a wide toothy grin. Whatever software ran the scenery had a perfectly macabre sense of humor.

None of this is real, he reminded himself. He was *really* back on Luna, in a plasti-metal womb, being force-fed sensations. But it damn well *felt* real. Open skies and Earth-normal gravity seemed totally natural, a relief from the tunnels of Luna. Rough homespun itched against his skin. The clink of chains on the gibbet and the moan of the wind through the spokes of the tall breaking wheel raised hairs at the nape of his nonexistent neck. Ian smelled horse-leather, and heard the clank of armor.

Spinning about, he saw a knight on horseback, framed by the flogging post and burning stake. Fear and amazement shot through him. He had been caught flat-footed, mooning over the reality of the set-up, his crossbow uncocked and untested, leaving him nothing but a dirk to save him from this armed apparition on a warhorse.

"Yo, villain," the knight called down, couching his lance. "Give my regards to Beelzebub!"

Ian ducked behind the gibbet, to keep from being ridden down in the first rush—all the time thinking, this is impossible. Unreal. Grossly unfair. The knight bearing down on him was armed with a lance, mace, broadsword, and even one of those thin silver vampire-killing stilettos. Right out of the chute, he was supposed to somehow gut and kill this heavily armored horse and rider, with nothing but bare hands and a sliver of sharp steel *that did not even exist*. There was no way this could happen. Not even in a feelie.

Sir Asshole rattled right up to the gibbet, taking a couple of lively stabs with the lance, laughing as Ian jumped from one side to the other. Then he lifted his visor, "Gotcha!"

It was Clive. Ian cursed, calling his teammate every rude anatomic name he could come up with on short notice, ending the string with,



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"You bugger-headed bastard, you lied! 'Go light,' you told me. 'Dirk and crossbow.' Then *you* terrorize the shit out of me, dressed like a steel scarecrow!"

Clive shrugged, letting his shoulder armor rattle. "Your line of credit was nowhere *near* long enough to arm us both. Besides, just moving in a suit like this requires training." Clive did a swift mounted pirouette, showing off his costume, which was that of a *gendarme de la Garde,* a Scots Archer armored *cap-à-pie,* à la Quentin Durward—gorget, greaves, and back-and-breast over chain-link hose and hauberk. Ian recognized the Robertson coat-of-arms in Clive's shield, three wolf's heads on a red field.

"Look, I'm the one who's disappointed"—Clive brought his lance down, resting the point against Ian's chest, pressing gently—"finding my teammate thumb-up-the-butt, gawking at the landscape. That ain't the Wolf Pack way. This is an elimination sweepstakes, not a goddamn *sightseeing* contest! You're a French bowman far from home, on an incredibly suicidal quest." Clive pushed harder with his lance. "Start fuckin' *acting* the part. Or you are going to be *dead.* Gone. Out of the game. Explaining to *Circuit Maximus* why you can't pay up."

Ian wanted to groan, or mayhap scream. Instead, he grimly unslung his crossbow and took a few practice pulls at cocking it. The bow came with a stirrup, goat's foot, and spanning belt, so that he could use his thigh and back muscles to bend the steel bow. Slip the goat's foot over the bow cord, put his foot in the stirrup, then straighten up. The bow was cocked. Stick in a wicked looking quarrel, and he was set to do damage. The immediate impulse was to test the bow's effectiveness by sticking it under the skirt of Clive's hauberk and squeezing the trigger. Only the threat of being left alone stayed his hand.

He unstrung the bow, and they set off, leaving the gallows hill behind. The gray mud and the dour medieval landscapes were supposed to match Transylvania, the Land Beyond the Trees—not as it was, but as it might have been in the days of Dracula. The white peaks of the Southern Carpathians poked through blue haze. How long was it since he had been lost among the Lunar Carpathians? Hours? Days? It seemed like centuries.

Fields and vineyards butted up against the blue mountains. The undead live more or less forever, so game time was telescoped. Anything from thirteenth century Kumans to Ottoman Timariot cavalry could come out of the Carpathian passes—Transylvania had been threatened or overrun by nearly everyone. In actual fact, the doomed crusade of Jean the Fearless had gotten no closer than Nicopolis, seventy or so leagues to the south, but considering how totally botched that crusade had been, ending up on the wrong side of the Transylvanian Alps was no more unimaginable than the actual disaster that had engulfed the cream of French chivalry on the Danube.

The cow path dipped down to ford a stream. On the far bank, a knight's pavilion stood planted in a field of stubble. A slim raven-haired damsel



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lounged in the shelter of the tent fly, black eyes shaded with kohl, bare feet peeping out from under a blue flounced skirt. Diamonds sparkled in her dark hair. She gave Clive a languid smile. Foot-slogging crossbowmen did not even rate a glance.

The knight himself came trotting round from behind the tent, a gruff bearded giant on a black charger, face flushed and beaded with sweat. He challenged Clive for "the right to cross the stream, and the hand of yon fair maiden."

Clive tipped his lance. "You may keep your fair maiden—hand, tits, toenails, and tiara. As for the stream, we will gladly back up and go around."

But the knave in black armor made it plain that his challenge was mere formality; Clive would not get away without a fight. Ian hurriedly cocked his crossbow, doubting the light bow would even dent the big man's armor, but in a crude set-up like this anything could happen. The "knight and lady" had to be part of the program—real villains with posh pavilions, and pretty maids at their mercy, had better things to do than camp by a brook, hoping to break lances with some stalwart stranger.

Clive grinned, then lowered his visor. He and the behemoth cantered to opposite ends of the stubble field. The black knight lifted his bridle; his lance came down. Clive did the same. Ian swallowed hard, no longer grudging Clive the horse and armor. Let Mr. Handsome go in and take the whacks. Ian would not have traded places for all the maidens in Transylvania.

The lady let fall her kerchief, and the two cavaliers in sheet metal launched themselves at each other. Hoof beats shook the stubble as chargers chewed up the turf. The galloping pair came together like a combination anvil chorus and ground-car collision. Ian flinched.

An instant before contact, Clive leaned in, angling his shield, throwing his whole body into the impact, a move that called for incredible concentration and timing. The black lance struck Clive's tilted shield, and was tossed outward. Clive's point caught the inner edge of the black shield, and skidded off, slamming into the man's breastplate at belly-button level. The lance bowed on impact, but Clive was braced for the shock, his body angled into the blow.

His opponent rose up out of the saddle, stirrups flying. He hung for a moment in midair, arms splayed, as his warhorse ran out from under him—then he came crashing down, bounced, and lay prone. Clive reined in directly in front of the pavilion.

The dark-eyed beauty in the blue dress raised her diamond crowned head a notch higher, giving Clive a haughty so-you-think-you've-won-me look. Clive answered with a jaunty salute, turned and trotted over to poke at the prone man with his lance. The fellow refused to respond. Clive lifted his visor, calling to Ian, "Get his purse and broadsword. I'll go after the horse."

The black charger had come to a halt by the brook, saddle empty, drinking nervously. Before Clive got there, Phil the Shill emerged from



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the weeds by the bank and seized the bridle, bringing the horse over to Clive. Phil was dressed in a jester's outfit, with three thin juggling knives thrust through his belt—acting as helpfully inoffensive as ever.

Ian frisked the Black Knight, finding the man's purse full of aspers, and his broadsword a bit heavy. Clive called to him, "Finish the fucker."

"What?" Ian looked up.

Clive tapped the silver stiletto with his gauntlet, then made a swift stabbing motion. "Use your dirk. Through the eye-slit." Ian stood rooted. Clive sighed, and waved to the jester. "Phil, show him how."

The tall scrawny jester ran up, bells jingling on his cap. Drawing a juggling knife, he tilted the man's helmet and slid the thin blade between the bars of the visor. Leaning forward, Phil put all of his weight behind the knife. The prone man shook till his armor rattled, then lay still.

"Good job," Clive called down. Ian felt like having a virtual vomit. Phil beamed, saying he knew where the White Company was rallying. Clive lifted an eyebrow. "Can you get us there?"

The jester nodded eagerly, "A few leagues farther on, this path crosses an irrigation ditch at a proper bridge—ignore the bridge, but follow the ditch until you come to a cherry orchard. Through the trees you can see a farmstead with a walled court. That's where the White Company will be."

Clive leaned down, took the black purse from Ian, counting out five silver aspers, giving them to the jester. Grinning his appreciation, Phil cocked his head toward the pavilion, "And what about her?"

Clive laughed, "Feel free. But give her half a chance, and you'll be joining him." He tapped the dead man with his lance.

Phil tucked the aspers in his purse, looking longingly at the pavilion.

"Some kept women will thank you for killing their lord and master, others might take it amiss." Clive handed Ian the reins to the black charger. "Between here and Dracula's Castle, we're going to be offered enough virtual tail to kill you out of sheer exhaustion." The French crusade's riotous progress through the Balkans was infamous for murder and debauchery. Beautiful concubines. Spearmen drowned in butts of wine. Monks scandalized. "It doesn't cost the casino a thing to jerk you off. Feelie-fucks are part of the programmed obstacles. Hell, a half-dozen gamers are coming in as eunuchs, just to avoid temptation."

The dark-haired damsel laughed at Clive, a high musical laugh, light and inviting. Her hand rested on a silver table set with wine and sweetmeats. Ian mounted up, not tempted in the least. The early morning entry meant they had been sent off before breakfast; Ian's stomach was already inquiring about lunch—soon the sweetmeats on the silver table would be more seductive than the perfumed bed within.

They passed more pavilions, and more women. Also some lumpy-looking peasants, who did not look happy to have bogus French knights tramping about. Crusaders had earned an evil reputation, even in Transylvania.

Clive hardly gave them a glance until well into the afternoon, when



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he stopped before a golden tent with a well-upholstered blonde seated by the entrance. Here Clive dismounted. A towering *djinn* in Turkish armor with boar's tusks and a wicked scimitar stood guard over the woman. Ian expected him to square off with Clive, but the damsel merely told the muscular demon to see to the horses. Then she gestured toward a low table decked with wine and fruit.

Clive rested his armored seat on the table, reaching for a wine goblet. The woman poured. She had big blue innocent eyes, lips soft as a child's and a friendly open smile.

"Is the food safe?" Phil asked.

"The wine is," Clive told him. "The fruit might give you diarrhea."

The blonde woman laughed and washed an apple in wine, offering it to Ian. "It's not poison," she promised solemnly, sounding like a girl determined to do good, whatever her natural impulse might be.

"But how do you *know,*" Phil whined nervously.

"I know." Clive and the blonde exchanged mischievous looks. He would not say more—but they ate and survived.

As they rode on, Clive kept joking with Phil, going over old games, refusing to say how he knew the food was safe. Finally they found the bridge and irrigation ditch, and, after that, the cherry orchard. Phil leaped the ditch and disappeared beneath the trees. Clive paused to pluck and eat some cherries. He handed a few down to Ian, saying sotto voce, "Cock your crossbow."

Ian did as he was told, wondering what had made Clive suddenly wary. Phil called out to them from under the trees. Clive spit out a seed, saying, "Phil is going to come running back—when he does, shoot him."

"Say *what?*" Ian stood holding a squareheaded armor-piercing quarrel and a handful of cherries.

"When Phil comes back, shoot him. Through the heart if you can. Point your bow at his chest and pull the trigger."

"My God, *why?*"

"A head shot's too hard. And a gut-shot would be cruel."

"Why shoot him at all?"

"Why do you think you brought that bow? You're going to shoot people. Might as well start with Phil. We don't *need* him anymore, and this is an *elimination* sweepstakes, remember?"

The jester leaped the ditch again, and came jogging back. "What's taking you guys?"

Clive shook his head, and started fumbling for something on the far side of his saddle. Ian stood mesmerized, clutching the cocked bow, telling himself it was all a hideous game, and no one was *really* going to die. But he still could not just put a quarrel into Phil's chest.

"What's wrong?" Phil demanded.

Clive nodded toward Ian.

The jester turned to him. "Well, what is it?" Clive rose up in his stirrups. The arm on the far side of his high saddle was holding his heavy flange-headed mace. Swinging it through a tremendous arc, he



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brought it down on with a wet smack on the back of Phil's jester cap. Ian saw Phil's eyes go wide and his jaw drop. The jester crumpled face forward, the back of his head a bloody mess.

Clive tried to flick the blood off the mace, with not much success. Hair and skin clung to the steel flanges. "See what you made me do? The crossbow would have been so much neater." He tossed the mace to Ian. "Clean it off."

Feeling numb, Ian knelt, trying to clean the mace in the orchard runoff, while Clive rolled Phil into the ditch with his lance. The cool green shade of the ditch smelled heavily of cherries. He handed back the mace and they set out again.

Halfway through the orchard, Clive reined in, saying, "At least the little shit wasn't lying."

Sheila and Gertrude came riding up, looking like Britomart and Amoret fresh out of the *Faerie Queene*. Sheila wore full armor and rode a big chestnut warhorse, carrying her lance half-couched to fit under the cherry branches. Her surcoat and shield bore the red lion of the White Company. Gertrude wore a ball gown and rode a dapple gray palfrey. Both looked wary.

"Where's Phil?" Sheila leaned forward to see under the lanes of trees.

Clive answered with an armored shrug. "He went his own way." Flecks of gore still clung to the mace.

Sheila and Gertrude were not totally taken in, but seemed willing to let Phil fend for himself, asking, "We still have a truce, don't we?"

Clive smiled cheerfully, "Until the Castle."

Ian marveled at the man's ability to lie. Some truce. Sure, it was a *game*—and he had never much liked Phil. But the pain was as real as the smell of ripe cherries. Ian could hardly stomach what he had seen so far. And worse was sure to come. At any moment Clive could start hacking at these two women—shouting happily for Ian to lend a hand.

As they rode on, Sheila and Gertrude started ribbing each other to keep up their spirits. They had gone through grisly deaths already, and bought their way back into the game. But at least these two hopeless addicts had a lively good humor. Already, Ian liked them more than he cared for Clive.

Trees thinned. Through the branches, Ian saw another ditch, and the white walls of a farmstead. "Load your bow," Clive whispered.

The bow was still cocked. Ian looked about, seeing no sign of trouble. No one but Sheila and Gertrude, riding just ahead.

"Load your bow, damn it!" Clive demanded.

Ian hesitated, hating to reach for the quarrel.

Gertrude turned to see what the commotion was. Her curly dark hair framed a round, pleasant face. Not plain. Not pretty. Just pleasant. She had not bothered to make herself beautiful—but Ian still felt moved. He was damn well *not* going to shoot her, even if it cost him the game. He smiled, trying to set her at ease.

Clive cursed and couched his lance.



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Ian saw a flash of color over Gertrude's shoulder. A line of men rose out of the ditch. The nearest man wore a sleeve-shaped turban and a short flashy green jacket, over baggy maroon parts. Ian smelled burning sulfur, and realized the men were pointing big crude matchlocks at them. Janissaries, elite Turkish infantry.

With a hideous crash, the whole line exploded in flame and smoke. The black horse beneath him screamed and jerked. Instinctively, Ian turned his mount about—neither he nor the horse wanted to face that hail of lead.

The beast stumbled on for a dozen yards, before going down in a thrashing heap. Ian struggled free of his dying mount. For a moment, he lay amid fallen cherries, mouth open, his jerkin smeared with horse blood. Janissaries swarmed out of the smoke, howling with glee, waving scimitars and short curved daggers. Sheila was down. She and her horse both looked dead. Clive was down, too. A janissary tore off the knight's helmet, and Ian caught a glimpse of Clive's cosmetic features grimacing in agony. A neck wound pumped blood onto his blond hair. Gertrude's horse was down, but she was up and running, trying not to trip on her gown.

Ian bolted, knowing he had no chance against a platoon of Turkish musketeers. None of this was *real,* but he aimed to be gone before they reloaded. Ducking branches and stumbling over furrows, he risked a panic-stricken glance back. Gertrude was pinned against a cherry tree, holding three colorful attackers at bay with a dagger. A dozen more stood around her, laughing and loosening their harem pants. Another pair was busy sawing off Clive's head. Janissaries were slave soldiers, raised from boyhood under rigid barracks disciplines, trained to take out their urges for sex and aggression "in the field." Murder, mayhem, and rape were as fundamental to them as the manual of arms.

He did not stop until he was huddled in the irrigation ditch. Ian could clearly see how insanely idiotic the whole business had been—thinking that they could beat *Circuit Maximus* at the casino's own game. He and Clive had gone up against a perfectly integrated program that suckered players in, then ground them up. The Wolf Pack, the White Company, Phil the Shill, and god knows how many others were all being dealt with swiftly and efficiently. It was only a matter of hours before the program hunted him down and finished him off in some painful dramatic fashion.

With no future worth worrying over, Ian decided to attend to the present. He was cold and miserable, lying in a clammy ditch. Virtual hunger gnawed at him. The need to eat was hardwired into the program, to keep him from just lying low and waiting for an opening. Well, he might as well die comfortably. Getting up, he followed the ditch back the way they had come. He knew he was nearing the cartpath when he came on Phil's body, head down in the ditch. Corpse beetles crawled over the back of his broken skull.

Dusk was descending on the virtual world by the time he came upon the line of pavilions. He sought out a cloth-of-gold tent lit by tall burning cressets and guarded by a huge *djinn* in Turkish armor. If the demon



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wanted to do him in, the monster had the strength to do a quick, neat job of it. Otherwise, Ian was determined to eat.

The silent colossus with the gleaming scimitar looked him over and let him in. As the silk tent-fly closed behind him, he saw the blonde was waiting, wearing the same good-girl, bad-girl smile that she had seen him off with. Her table was set with cous-cous and stewed chicken, sprinkled with saffron. Ian set at once to eating, too hungry to care what the meat might contain. Love potions. Sleeping draughts. Slow poison. Whatever kept him from getting to Dracula's Castle was fair game.

She watched, blue eyes alight with amusement. "Where are your friends?"

"Couldn't make dinner," Ian replied. He gave a brief brutal description of Phil's murder and the Turkish ambush. She looked sad and offered more cous-cous.

Maybe there *was* a love potion in the saffron chicken, because the more he ate, the better the blonde looked, with her upturned nose and infectious good humor. There just had to be a computer-perfect body under her golden robe.

She stood up, taking him by the hand, heading toward her curtained bed. What the hell. She was clearly programmed to please. If she was also programmed to slip a stiletto into him, he only hoped she'd let him come first; anything else would be cruel.

The bed was lit by a single candle suspended in a slotted brass ball, a sort of orb-shaped censer giving off shafts of light. A golden haze filled the curtained chamber. Somewhere in the gaming software, there was a real artist at work. She knelt beside the perfumed coverlet, hands clasped in her lap. "Would it please M'Lord if I undressed?"

Ian grunted and sat down on the bed, kicking off his boots. He'd never thought much of virtual sex. Programmed partners always seemed so slick, so perfect, so ready to please. Real women did not eagerly submit to every semi-sordid act the male mind could imagine, and then come at a touch—just when you wanted them to. Not all the time, anyway.

She let her robe fall and leaned forward, helping him with his pants. As he pulled his homespun shirt off over his head, he felt her go to work, first with her hand, then with lips and tongue. Letting out a little gasp, he lay back on the bed. This was more like it.

Without warning, she bit him. He yelped, struggled up onto an elbow, and looked down at her. The virtual bitch had *bit* him, hard, in the soft hollow of his thigh. He could see the red teeth marks.

"Why the hell did you do that?"

She looked impishly up from between his legs, all smiles and innocence. "To show my Master that this is real."

Then she rose up and kissed him, covering his face in a cascade of golden hair. "This is Transylvania," she told him, "land of the love bite." To prove it, she nibbled on his neck.

It seemed to work. What followed did not feel like virtual sex. To Ian's intense surprise, he found himself really fucking, in a perfumed bed with


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an utterly real woman that he had met that afternoon over lunch. She was wild, winsome, and headstrong, with her own ideas about pleasure, playfully unpredictable. By the time they were done, he was exhausted, and utterly pleased.

"Was it worth waiting for?"

"Waiting?" Ian stared at her. How do you properly thank a program, especially one with soft curves and an impish grin?

"Doesn't this beat a *Circuit Maximus* guest suite?"

He sat up in bed, "Angel?"

She rolled her blue eyes. "Who else?"

"But how?" He gestured at the tent and bed.

"Protective coloration." She started to re-do her hair. "Mobile hazards are programmed to avoid the line of pavilions. Can't have Mongols messing up the casino's honey trap."

Seeing her lift her arms up to redo her hair was too much. He reached over to slide her closer. "It was worth waiting for. You feel ungodly wonderful."

She laughed, not resisting, letting him run hands over her. "That's just programmed hormones. The casino jacks up your testosterone, to keep you virile and distracted. And we have serious work to do. With Clive out of the game—you, me, Tiny, and the Hound are the only ones left to tackle the Castle."

Ian did not like the odds. "Shit—I think I'll take my testosterone to the tent next door."

She gave him a peaches-and-cream pout. "Please don't be such a mark. So Clive is out. He served his purpose."

"The only purpose Clive served was to get his head planted on a virtual pike."

"He got us here. He's the one who infected your suit."

"My suit?" He stopped, thinking back to the *Lunar* Carpathians and the convenient virus in his suit programming.

"I mean, what were the chances of Clive just *finding* a ticketed tourist lost in the highlands? A zillion to one—right? He helped out the odds."

"Fuck," Ian shook his head. "I've been screwed from the beginning."

"And you'll keep on being screwed until you learn to get going and take *control.*" She stamped her foot, blue eyes blazing, beginning to look like the old Angel—minus the rattlesnake tattoo. "I for one can't wait forever. I've got my people around Neptune to worry about—and a sweepstakes to win. This is *real.* No one's going to rescue you. Not Clive. Not your agency. No one but you and me can do it."

He had been made into a total mark. First by Clive. Then by the casino. "Okay, okay, I'm in. Just one thing."

"What?" Angel went back to fixing her hair.

"How much is this virtual virility good for?"

She grinned. "Near infinite."

A bright, full summer moon turned the Transylvanian plateau into a



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velvety landscape, half blue moonlight, half dense shadow. It was near to midnight, but Ian kept feeling it was neither night nor day, but some weird in-between world, cloud-wracked and peopled with ghouls and blood-sucking phantoms. The Hound led, loping ahead, sniffing out snares and sentries. Tiny's dark bulk loomed behind Ian. Angel was at his side, warm and comforting.

Since the Hound retained his nominal intelligence, the Wolf Pack got a werewolf without having to pay the steep prices attached to any sort of magic. The xeno lost his speakbox, but he'd never been much of a talker. He continued to radiate his usual superhuman confidence, slipping past one dark obstacle after another, until Dracula's tower loomed ahead, huge and lonely, rising straight out of the plain, casting a deep immense shadow. It was a twelfth-century keep, copied on Byzantine works, seven stories tall, pierced by nothing but loopholes. The inner floors had to be as black as the devil's basement, even at noonday. At night, Ian found it utterly uninviting.

The remnants of the White Company were laying dilatory siege to the place, having beaten back the janissaries. Too weak to storm the tower, they were merely patrolling the approaches, killing or turning back any gamers who refused to join them. They hadn't enough players to picket the entire tower, and posting sentries in the Transylvanian darkness was semi-suicidal, so they relied on strong roving patrols, which the Hound artfully avoided.

Crawling from one moonlit hummock to the next, Ian edged after the Hound. The xeno led them right up to the base of the tower—a massive battered plinth, topped by blocks of dark stone rising toward black battlements blotting out the stars. Here the Hound faded and Tiny took over. The *djinn* disguise was all tusks and muscle, no magic came with it, but he still had the innate talents of a SuperChimp—including balance and climbing ability. Taking out a pair of pointed hooks tied together by a couple of fathoms of rope, he went straight up the wall.

Standing in the dark shadow of the tower, Ian could hardly tell how Tiny did it. Using the hooks as both grapples and pitons, the SuperChimp swarmed up the side as easily as if he were walking on all fours. In a matter of minutes, a line snaked down.

The were-hound yipped a warning.

Angel whispered, "Let's go," seizing the line and starting to walk up the wall, almost as freely as Tiny had. Living in spin ships had stripped away any inborn fear of heights. Ian grabbed the dangling line, planting his feet against the wall, doing his best to imitate her. Bats brushed past, squeaking in the blackness. He could feel the rope jerk as Angel went hand over hand above him. Strangely enough, he was not scared. Everything was tinged with a virtual invincibility. Probably part of the trap, like his heightened testosterone—a hormone rush that would carry him up the wall into who-knows-what.

The outer battlements were bathed in moonlight. Ian pulled himself through a narrow embrasure, sliding softly onto a stone guard walk



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between the parapet and inner wall. Angel crouched in the shadows, her hand over his mouth. Her thin fingers felt warm and fresh, absurdly sexy. She pointed silently down the walkway.

Ian saw empty, curving stonework. He nodded. Angel took her hand away and they set out together. Less than a quarter of the way around they came on a pair of bodies in plate and mail armor, their necks bent at odd angles. Tiny's work.

Farther on, they found Tiny himself, looming over a third body at the head of a dark stairwell, his *djinn* fangs shining hideously in the moonlight. They had breached the tower. No other team had gotten this far. Win or lose, the Wolf Pack was living up to its dubious reputation. What came next did not look so inviting. Aside from the scant light filtering down the spiral stairway, and the odd moonlit loophole, there looked to be absolutely no interior illumination. Dracula did not need light.

Angel tied the rope around her waist, signing that she would go first. Ian took the rope end, passed it around his middle, tied it tight, then handed it to Tiny—glad that Angel had volunteered to lead. Nothing could have convinced him to go first into that darkness, where the undead had every advantage.

Flint scraped on steel, and a thin sliver of light appeared, shining down the back stairwell. Angel had the brass candleball in her hand, the light that had hung above her curtained bed; by holding the ball in her gloved hand, she let only a thin shaft fall on the stairs. They descended.

Ian held tight to the rope, feeling each step with his toes. Moonlight ended at the first turn in the spiral stairs. There was nothing beyond but the dark castle odor of cold wet stone. The stair wound counterclockwise, anti-sunwise, so that defenders retreating up the stairs had their left hands free. Vampires were notoriously left-handed.

At the bottom, Angel paused, motioning for him to stop, then stepping over something in the blackness. She spoke for the first time since coming into the tower, "Watch that last step, it's a baddie."

By the thin light of her candle, Ian could just make out the shining jaws of a mantrap, lying on the last step, set to snap shut on his leg. The jagged teeth would tear through muscle and break bone, leaving him to writhe in very real agony until the game ended or some soft-hearted ghoul came along.

As he stepped over, Angel caught him, keeping him from coming down where he naturally would have. As she set him down, he saw the outlines of a second mantrap, right at the foot of the stairs—blackened and sprinkled with straw, making it nearly invisible. You were *supposed* to see the first one, sitting on the last step—then step over it onto the second.

Angel whispered softly, "A good sign."

Ian nodded. Not your normal stairwell. The passageway led where no one was supposed to go. You could not have sentries losing legs as they



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went on and off duty. Angel called to Tiny, and the apish *djinn* leaped over both traps, landing next to his mistress.

They set out. Bats squeaked overhead. Clumps of the little beasts hung from cobwebbed stonework. Ian had his crossbow out, expecting to see guards or worse. The passage curved, following the contour of the tower. Ian silently counted steps. He calculated that they were about halfway around, when suddenly Angel's light vanished.

The rope at his waist snapped taut, jerking him forward. He let out a muffled squeal. His boots slid on straw, then the stone flags beneath his feet disappeared. He fell into blackness.

For a horrible moment Ian pictured himself splattering on a stone floor, or crashing down on top of Angel in some spiked pit. Then the line about his waist jerked tight. He caught the rope above him, pulling himself up, taking the strain off his waist, which had to support Angel's weight as well, keeping himself from being cut in half. Swinging in the dark, he realized that they had fallen into an oubliette, a wide mural chamber several stories deep, with no exit except the hole at the top.

Once you stumbled in, you were lucky if the fall killed you, since the alternative was to lie broken on the floor below, waiting in utter blackness for thirst or internal injuries to put you out of the game. A fine way to go mad.

Between labored breaths, Ian felt himself moving. Bit by bit, the rope was rising. He bumped against the domed ceiling of the oubliette. Tiny was pulling them out. Ian let go of the rope. When his waist was flush with the stone lip, he scrambled back into the passage, feeling absurdly "safe." Another nanosecond to catch his breath, then he and Tiny drew Angel up out of the dark pit.

The only way to get past the oubliette was to brace feet and back against the stonework—like climbers in a rock chimney—and inch across. On the far side was another mantrap, waiting for anyone incautious enough to try to leap over the opening. Ian hoped these hellish entanglements showed that they were headed in the right direction.

Beyond the oubliette, he saw moonlight at the end of the tunnel. Ahead was a wide recess, with a tall window niche opening onto an inner court topped by bare battlements. Ian could see windows running around the inner wall, turning the enclosed court into a vast airshaft that brought air and light into the tower. Bats fluttered by the window. Next to the niche was a heavy wooden door, reinforced with iron bands. From the placement of the windows, Ian guessed that the door led into a series of mural chambers spaced around the upper floor of the tower. Tiny tried the door. He might as well have tried to move the tower.

The window niche was too cramped for a battering ram, but there *had* to be a way in. Game rules required that obstacles be prodigious, but not absolutely impossible. Angel stuck her head out the window. Blonde hair shone in the moonlight. She grabbed Ian by the shoulder. "Look, we can go around."

Ian gauged distances between windows, and silently shook his head.



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The windows were well spaced, and the inner shaft was faced with small flush stones. It could not be climbed the way they had gone up the outer wall. "Tiny can do it," Angel assured him. She told Tiny to stop grunting over the door and take a look out the window.

The SuperChimp in *djinn* disguise stuck his head out, nodding eagerly. Angel played out more rope, then she and Ian braced themselves against the stonework. Tiny swung out the window, cutting an astonishing arc, just catching the stone sill of the next window. Tiny did not seem perturbed by height or distance, reminding Ian of Poe's pitiless killer ape in *Murders in the Rue Morgue*—monstrous and unstoppable.

Tiny pulled them after him. The neighboring window opened on a mural chamber, and another iron-bound door. So they tried the next window, and the next, swinging silently over the stone court six stories below. Bats flew back and forth, excited by their passage.

Finally they came to a window sealed with leaded glass. Angel peered through one of the dim little panes. "Bingo," she breathed softly, signaling to Tiny. The *djinn* took off his Turkish helmet, using it to shield his hand, giving the window a ferocious tap. Panes splintered. The sash buckled. Shards of glass tinkled against the stone, falling like snow crystals into the court below. They were in.

The trophy room was a cross between some *ancienne noblesse* dining hall and Kublai Khan's rumpus room. Curved and pronged weapons lined the walls, along with Gothic armor and silk tapestries. Turkish battleflags and the heads of weird steppe antelope hung over a huge hand-carved table surrounded by Roman-style cushioned stools. A silver table service glittered in the light from the broken window.

The only door was a brass monstrosity, bolted on the inside, that looked as if it could not be cracked with a tactical nuke. But what they wanted sat right at the far end of the banquet table. A tall barred cage contained an emir's ransom—gold chains, jade rings, big bevel-cut emerald necklaces, silver orthodox crosses, a diamond coronet or two. Perched atop the heap was a ridiculously large blood-red ruby. The Vampire's Heart.

Angel bounded down the length of the banquet table and went to work, picking at the lock. Tiny shambled after her to lend a hand. Ian stood by the window, thinking that it all had been too easy.

He was right.

A bat flitted by, looping between the candlesticks, side-slipping into a neat split-s, and coming down behind Angel. As the beast descended, it started to grow, extending its legs, lengthening head and torso, assuming human form. Wings became a great billowing cloak. Ian stood rooted. Too late he realized why the tower had so few human defenders.

As the face formed, the vampire's features took on a familiar cast, showing a sharp spade beard, thin smiling lips, and slick black hair. It was Phil the Shill. There was no sign of the mess Clive's mace had made. The undead could not be daunted by normal means.

Tiny leaped at him. It looked to be no contest. Vampire or not, Phil was still a Loonie, with long spindly arms and legs, looking barely able



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to stand in a one-*g* field, much less put up a fight. The *djinn*-cum-SuperChimp outmassed him handily.

And it *was* no contest. Tiny lunged. Phil batted aside one outstretched hand and grabbed the other one, grinning. He twisted the hand sideways. Through Tiny's wounded bellowing, Ian could hear the bone crack. Phil twisted more, all the way around, until the hand came free, separating from the wrist with a bloody snap. Tiny howled and staggered back, swinging with his sound arm. Phil seized it with both hands, planting a foot in Tiny's chest and yanking. The arm came off at the root.

Tiny dropped to his knees, screeching in pain. Phil leaped at his prey with fangs and nails; when he was finished, Tiny lay dismembered and half-decapitated. White cervical vertebrae poked through bloody flesh.

Ian was horrified and sickened. Not just by what he had seen, but by the gruesome unfairness of the game. All this time, Phil had been tracking them, letting them think they were winning, while *Circuit Maximus* laughed up its collective sleeve.

Phil wiped gore from his lips. "Don't look so shocked. Any decent Greek scholar would have known that Philaemos meant 'blood-lover.'" Ian could see Angel working furiously at the lock. He raised his crossbow. Fighting was hopeless, but if he could hold the vampire's attention, Angel had a chance to open the cage, grab the Vampire's Heart, and end the game.

Laughing at the antique weapon, Phil advanced. Ian took a step back, keeping the corner of the table between him and the vampire. The window was open beside him—but that was no escape. Without Tiny, Ian would splatter on the black stones.

Phil glided around the table. "Give my regards to Clive."

Angel gave the lock a last twist. It snapped open with a hideous click you could have heard in Constantinople. She threw open the barred door.

Spinning about, the vampire sprang the length of the table, slamming the cage shut, holding it closed with superhuman strength. With his free arm, he backhanded Angel, sending her flying across the table. She landed in a heap against the wall, taking a velvet stool and sterling place setting with her.

Ian could only think how horribly, monstrously unfair it all was. There *had* to be a way to win—it said so in the goddamn casino contract. But he had no hope, nothing to fight with, not even Clive's silver stiletto. In a second, the vampire would be on him, tearing at his neck, twisting his head until it came off. He wanted to cry.

Phil looked down at Angel, huddled behind the stool. He blew her a kiss. "Don't bother to get up, girl. I'm saving you for last."

Then he turned back to Ian, trapped against the window. Ian saw Angel scoop something long and thin off the floor, tossing it to him. It turned and flashed in the moonlight. "Shoot him!" she shouted.

Instinctively, Ian caught the object, it was an oak-handled silver-bladed knife. He knocked the iron bolt from his crossbow, slipped the knife in its place and took aim.



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Phil screamed in baffled rage, leaping forward. Ian shot him straight through the heart.

They brought him out of the vaults and hoisted him onto a chariot. Touts dressed as nymphs and satyrs dragged him onto the casino floor. Holos thundered overhead.

And not just Ian either. The whole Wolf Pack was on chariots, even Tiny, who was not much of a burden in one-sixth g. Clive flashed him a grin of triumph. It was weird to see them alive and ecstatic after being decapitated and/or dismembered. Sheila and Gertrude were in the throng, as deliriously happy as if they had won. Half the White Company was there to cheer someone else's triumph. Addicts to the last.

Casino shills crowded around as *Circuit Maximus* broke out the cheap champagne; gaming palaces loved to record mob scenes around a big winner. It was their best advertisement. A life-size animated holo, done up like a slave in Roman leather, held a laurel wreath over his head, whispering in a sexy synthesized voice, *sic transit gloria mundi*—passing are the glories of the world.

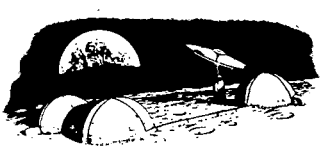
So enjoy them now. He looked over at Angel. She was no longer blonde and bouncy, but, by God, she had guts, and purpose—and enough credit to save her people orbiting Neptune.

A crisp smartly dressed Dirtsider, with an outdoor tan and earthbound muscles shoved his way through the crowd, easily parting the Loonies, asking if Ian was really who he claimed to be. Short of a chromosome match, Ian no longer had any proof of identity—but what the hell. "Ian MacNeil at *yer* service."

The fellow demanded to know why he had cashed his ticket in. Didn't he *know* that gambling with agency credits was a termination offense, possibly a felony? This *had* to be a casino touch. No one could be so obtuse—but Ian was ready to play along. He yelled down from the chariot, "I quit."

Loonies cheered, laughing at the ridiculous groundhog, trying to bully someone who had just won several lifetimes worth of credit. Casino beauties in body paint and moonstone g-strings climbed aboard the chariot, happy to start helping him spend it. A newsie from some Tycho-based casino network thrust a recorder at him. "Ian MacNeil, you have just won a *Circuit Maximus* grand sweepstakes! What are you going to do next?"

Angel smiled over at him—showing only the good side of her face. Ian grinned back, "I'm going to Neptune." ●





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# ON BOOKS

by Moshe Feder

## Brittle Innings

**by Michael Bishop**

Bantam, $21.95 (hardcover)

The time is World War II and baseball soldiers on, despite the departure of many of the best players to the service. The shortage of talent is being felt even in the minor leagues. Shortstop Danny Boles is recruited from high school obscurity in Oklahoma to join Georgia's Highbridge Hellbenders, a Class C farm club for the Philadelphia Phillies.

Danny's a talented ballplayer, but his life has been complicated by his father's abandonment of him and his mother, his stammer and even his notably large ears.

He has developed a reaction of responding to extreme stress by losing the ability to speak. After a shocking experience on the train to Georgia, he arrives in that condition at the rambling house shared by the team's unmarried members. His new teammates assume he is congenitally mute. Naturally he ends up rooming with the team's other oddball, Henry "Jumbo" Clerval, the biggest, ugliest man Danny's ever seen, the team's star first baseman and longball hitter.

What follows is the story of a baseball season, the story of a friendship (which may evoke Steinbeck for some), a coming of age story, and a fascinating recreation of a particular time and place: minor league baseball in the South during World War II. By now, you may be asking why it's being reviewed here. Indeed, Bantam is packaging and marketing it as a mainstream book. (I hope they get the broader audience for Mike Bishop they're trying for, rather than have the book be neglected in both markets.)

The answer is that marketing considerations aside, this very definitely is science fiction. Henry "Jumbo" Clerval is a permanent stranger in a strange land, an alien who must always observe humanity from outside, one who, like Data on *Star Trek: The Next Generation,* aspires to be human. Henry is SF's Adam, the genre's first native life form; he is the creature given life by Frankenstein.

Via glimpses of his journal we learn how he survived and made his way across the northern wastes carrying the corpse of his creator. (Mary Shelley made some changes, we are told, and never knew the later parts of the story.) After a sojourn with the Inuit people, he moved south into the American heartland, where, thanks to an accidental encounter in an outfield and the kindness of a stranger who



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saw potential in him, he learned the skills of baseball. Now he passes the numberless years of his possibly endless life playing the game he has come to love, first as part of his self-humanization program, and later for its own sake. It is a measure of Bishop's achievement that all of this never seems merely incongruous.

Frankenstein's "monster" has been brought back before, but never to such powerful effect. Bishop's success rests partly in his imaginative and daring decision to put the creature into a context in which it seemingly doesn't belong and partly on his determination to then play it straight.

This is not a satire or a farce, as it might have been in other hands. Instead, it is a warm evocation of a time, and a powerful re-imagining of a central figure of SF's underlying myth. For all the valuable alien viewpoint that he provides, Henry is as sympathetic and human as any character in the book, a figure as honorable as he is intriguingly mysterious, as tragic as he is dangerous. We like Danny Boles, too, but his only real advantage is that he is easier to identify with.

I don't know if writers still aspire to produce The Great American Novel. I'm not sure I know what that is, anyway, particularly in our SF universe of discourse. Yet I have a feeling that of many fine SF novels that might somehow relate to that phrase, this one comes closest to being a serious candidate for that grand appellation.

Read the book and judge for yourself.

## Temporary Agency

**By Rachel Pollack**

St. Martin's Press, $18.95 (hardcover)

In my last column I talked about wanting to catch up with authors whose work I'd been neglecting. This new novel by Rachel Pollack (and the book to which it's a loose sequel, the 1988 *Unquenchable Fire*) is a perfect example of what makes such an effort worthwhile. I was bowled over by her audacity, originality, and satirical power and by the detailed cohesiveness of her vision.

The world of this novel is just a step away from our own and many of its people still remember the life we lead. Its many familiar everyday elements only add to the wonderfully disorienting power of the things that are different about it. A change in the laws of the universe, or more likely an upwelling of the latent true laws that were always there, underneath, has resulted, after a tumultuous, sometimes violent, frequently miracle-driven revolution, in a society that has abandoned the mechanistic for the numinous, the worship of cold logic for the intuitive and mythological. Daily life is infused with magic and rituals that are shamanistic, yet not necessarily primitive, and society is broadly united in its acceptance and celebration of the apparently irrefutable new revelation. (A few stubborn adherents of the old faiths are tolerated and ignored.)

The Founders were the apostles, the embodiments, the martyrs, the lawgivers for this new faith. Arising spontaneously around the world, they led an irresistible cru-



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sade against the established order. The Tellers are the inheritors of the Revolution, its latter day priesthood, keeping it alive by recounting the acts of the Founders and the Stories the Founders told. This retelling of Stories is a powerful central element of the new creed whose vitality is frequently renewed by fresh signs and wonders. (And none of what I've just said can really convey the particular, unique feel of the mythology Pollack has fashioned, or the convincing illusion of completeness and the delightful strangeness it embodies.)

This novel is the story of Ellen Pierson's encounters with Bright Beings—the new order's collective name for what we'd call angels and demons—and with the Federal body that deals with them, the Spiritual Development Agency. As a teenager she plays a central role in trying to save her cousin Paul from a Malignant One known as Lisa Black Dust 7. In the process, she meets and is befriended by her idol, Alison Birkett, a specialist in demonic law, who first gained fame for exposing the malignant infestation of the Pentagon.

As an adult, Ellen becomes interested in the role played by a Benign One known as Margaret Light-at-the-End-of-the-Tunnel 23 in the reform campaign of an inspirational leader named Alexander Timmerman. This leads her to revive her friendship with Alison on a new, intimate level and to once again find herself at the center of momentous events. The climactic scene, when Timmerman performs an "enactment" on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange and Margaret's power is unleashed, is unlike any heretofore imagined for that locale.

Don't miss *Temporary Agency;* its effect on you will be anything but temporary. Seek out as well, if you can, *Unquenchable Fire,* worthy winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award. Although reading it is not necessary to enjoyment of the new book—they are bound by common setting rather than characters and plot—at almost twice the length, it offers much more of the remarkable world Pollack has created. Part fantasy, part sociological SF of a high order, both of Pollack's novels set in the near future after the Founders' Revolution demand to be read by anyone who desires reassurance that there's a place in the genre for something more than "the same old thing."

## Mysterium

**By Robert Charles Wilson**

Bantam Spectra, $11.95 (trade paperback)

While Rachel Pollack shows us that there are options beyond "the same old thing," Bob Wilson happily demonstrates that it still has its uses. Taking a concept that goes all the way back to Murray Leinster's "Sidewise in Time" (1934), the story that first introduced alternate worlds to modern science fiction—I may even have spotted a moment of specific homage when a highway is found to abruptly end at a newly appeared forest—he tells us the story of Two Rivers, Michigan, a town transported into an alternate reality when a scientific experiment goes awry.

Yet displacement among the worldlines is not the main point of



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the story here, as it was in the Leinster, whose melodramatic events served mainly to display the ramifications of the premise. Here we have a convincing portrayal of how real people, ordinary Americans, might respond to such an incomprehensible event. Wilson's control of characterization is as sure as his prevailing tone is calm. This quiet matter-of-factness only adds to the verisimilitude and to the effectiveness of the dramatic peaks. The eerie atmosphere and sense of isolation thus produced is palpable. We feel sure that no immigrant or exile has ever been cut off from his roots as absolutely as these people.

The people best qualified to find a way back die in the experiment's fiery aftermath, but high school history teacher Dex Graham cannot stop trying to understand the world they've fallen into, and young scientist Howard Poole, who was not at the lab or yet fully briefed by his uncle, the head of the project, at the time of the disaster, struggles to comprehend what happened and whether it could be reversed. The townspeople must deal, both as individuals and as a community, with an invasion by the natives of their new reality. The invaders are about as warm and welcoming as a Michigan winter. Though some individuals show themselves capable of friendly behavior, as occupiers they are quite stern in their enforcement of their edicts. Some of the townspeople will end up hanging from lamp posts.

The new world's history apparently diverged from ours surprisingly far back, considering that their English and ours are mutually comprehensible. (I won't specify the divergence point here, since I know some of you will want to try to guess for yourselves as you read.) Wilson feeds us tantalizing tidbits of their history, but little in the way of simple answers. It is startling to have someone opine that the religiously oppressive, heavy-handed Consolidated Republic government is one of the world's more liberal regimes. Their version of Christianity evolved quite differently, built around what we call Gnosticism. Their Consolidated Republic, based on a confederation of the French and English colonies in North America, is engaged in a war with the Spaniards at the western border, and since their science and technology are not as advanced as ours, Two Rivers is viewed primarily as a valuable source of strategic information. In all other respects, however, the town is an embarrassment, a denial of the supposed inevitability of their cultural, political, and religious norms.

Wilson's resolution of all this is convincing, and consistent with the story's premise and internal logic, but not everyone will find it emotionally satisfying. In retrospect, I felt some uncertainty about whether there was really a rich enough idea here for a novel. Aside from the internal "action" that's part of the excellent characterization to which I've already referred, not quite enough happens for my taste to justify its novel length. I suspect that compression to a novella might have heightened the work's impact. Still, post hoc editorial-style carping aside, this is an-



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other worthy addition to the steadily growing and impressive body of Robert Charles Wilson's work and well worth your time.

## The Hacker and the Ants

**by Rudy Rucker**

AvoNova, $20.00, (hardcover)

High concept, high tech, high (and low) comedy or all of the above, Rudy Rucker can usually be relied on for high spirits and high speed action. Sorry if that sounds like a cover blurb, but it's basically true. He's certainly a key inheritor of the Harrison school of farce and satire. He brings to these a real, in-depth understanding of the science he's playing with (one thinks especially of his mathematical entertainments) and his own uniquely demented eighth dimensional point of view.

Our hero this time is Jerzy Rugby, an accomplished professional hacker who is helping to build the first household robot. Jerzy's life is not exactly calm at the moment: his wife Carol has recently left him, he hasn't been seeing much of his teenage kids and he is being pestered by realtors who want to sell the house he's renting. His refuge has been his work, but now the experimental virtual ants that his employer, Roger Coolidge, has been working on have gotten loose and into *his* computer. They are more than just big viruses. His attempt to find out how and why this happened leads him into a string of adventures that, naturally, will change his life.

Like many Sheckley heroes, he finds he has to change jobs. Like many other Rucker heroes, he finds he has to get stoned. Who can blame him when he is being threatened with harm to his wife and children by a mysterious and frightening figure in cyberspace? The ants themselves endanger his very access to the net, where so much of his life is conducted. A carnal interest in a young Vietnamese woman at a bakery leads to his being unjustly blamed for a major act of cultural sabotage and his former employer supports the charges against him. His new employer proves to be engaged in industrial espionage against his former employer, but Jerzy's qualms about this are overridden by their willingness to bail him out and find him a good lawyer. Throughout all this activity, we learn about the use of virtual simulations to perfect new technologies. One can imagine it actually being done roughly as Rucker describes.

It's not really giving anything away with this kind of book to say that Jerzy does ultimately triumph over the ants and his other adversities, although he has to go beyond cyberspace to do it. The point here is not the destination but the ride, and the ride is fun. This doesn't displace any of my earlier favorites by Rucker, but it might become one of yours.

## Towing Jehovah

**by James Morrow**

Harcourt Brace & Co., $23.95 (hardcover)

James Morrow has made his reputation with books based on audacious and original concepts, concepts that are then explored in an ambitiously literary way. Now he has gone from toying with the idea of a redemptive savior to taking on



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God himself. Just to even the odds a bit, God is dead.

We're talking high satire here, not realistic extrapolation, but having stated the concept, with its cosmic chutzpah, he goes on to treat it as a good SF writer, rigorously working out its ramifications. It's a good thing he doesn't live in Iran.

The title, in fact, sums it up neatly. God has died and his two mile long body is floating in the sea. Before they too die, the angels contact the Vatican and ask that His body be properly interred in an icy tomb they have prepared for Him in the Arctic. The Pope of course agrees and hires the world's largest oil tanker and its former captain (living in disgrace since the tanker ran aground while he was off the bridge, creating a terrible oil spill) to tow the divine corpse. Representing the Church on the voyage will be a distinguished Jesuit physicist named Ockham. (Morrow heroically refrains from making razor jokes for the length of the book.)

The hastily assembled, diverse crew is deeply affected by the proximity of the divine corpse and by what it represents and portends. Gradually, their self-control falls away as they begin to understand the guilt-free license of the post-deistic world. When an ancient island inexplicably resurfaces, lifting the ship out of the ocean with it, the crew deserts and things get pretty nasty for a while, à la *Lord of the Flies*. But the real threat to the mission is from an unexpected direction.

A castaway they rescued is a committed atheist, rationalist, and feminist. She sees God's body, even dead, as a guarantee of more oppressive patriarchy, and vows to destroy it. She manages to get a message out to her like-minded friends. The method ultimately chosen by these conspirators is highly unlikely and results in some scenes of surreal comedy.

This is sociological SF really, not theological. It examines what God really means to people. As with most of Jim Morrow's books, it can safely be said that you haven't read a book like this before. In my opinion, you should.

## Alternate Worlds

**Edited by Michael Morton**

Published at 19 Bruce St., Rodbourne, Swindon, Wiltshire SN2 2EL United Kingdom.
In the U.S. from R.B. Schmunk, 611 W. 111 St., #26, New York, NY 10025-1811. $18 for four issues, $5 per single issue.

As a bonus this time, I offer a magazine review. It's of special interest to those of you who share my fascination with the "what ifs" of history. *Alternate Worlds,* whose first issue came out last spring, could be described as a journal or (in Hugo-rules terms) as a semi-prozine. As the title suggests, it is solely dedicated to one topic, and on the strength of the first issue, I'd say that it's going to make the most of it.

That first issue includes an excellent survey of the field by Brian Stableford that is an expanded version of the entry he wrote for *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction,* a report by Evelyn C. Leeper on the lively ConFrancisco alternate history panel, a discussion of Opera-



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tion Sealion (the Nazi plan to invade England in 1940) with attention to three books that have made use of it, and an abridged transcript of "Without Her," a BBC radio play in which Margaret Thatcher loses the election of 1978. Perhaps best of all, R. B. Schmunk and Evelyn C. Leeper have prepared a seventeen page list of alternate history stories and novels, arranged, from the big bang to the present, in order of the date at which they diverge from our own history. This is thought-provoking in a number of ways and also serves as an excellent checklist for further reading. Some will consider this alone worth the price of the magazine. Naturally, there are also book reviews.

I've noticed in the past that interest in this topic is something you tend to have at full strength or not at all. If you do, you're hungry for more relevant information and eager to contact others who can discuss it with you. *Alternate Worlds* should fill the bill in all respects. I recommend it. ●

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| 9:00AM | Wake, and fan the flames of desire. |
| 10:00AM | Smite the fickle with love arrows. |
| 11:00AM | Administer unrequited passions. |
| 12:00PM | Errands: Sale on white fletching feathers at Leda's Shoppe. |
| 1:00PM | Lunch. |
| 2:00PM | Smite the fickle again. |
| 3:00PM | Help Narcissus find true love. |
| 4:00PM | Nap. |
| 5:00PM | Give guest lecture on Writing Love Letters at the Academy. |
| 6:00PM | Smite the fickle again. |
| 7:00PM | Tempt the Vestal Virgins. |
| 8:00PM | Dinner with Venus and Mars. Bring Ambrosia. |
| 9:00PM | Visit Psyche. |
| 10:00PM | Smite the fickle again. |
| 11:00PM | Inspire poets to write mediocre verse, and a few to write poetry. |
| 12:00AM | Whisper late night second thoughts to lovers. |
| 1:00AM | Brush teeth, smite fickle once again, sleep at last. |

—Lawrence Schimel



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# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Two big holiday con(vention) weekends this month, and PhilCon between. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE (self-addressed stamped envelope). For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons making music as Filthy Pierre.—Erwin S. Strauss

## NOVEMBER 1994

11-13—**OryCon.** For info, write: **Box 5703, Portland OR 97228.** Or phone: **(503) 236-0349** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Portland OR (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Red Lion Columbia River. Guests will include: Pat Cadigan, Beth Meacham, Tappan King, Real Musgrave.

11-13—**TusCon. (602) 881-3709.** Best Western Executive Inn, Tucson AZ. Noted hospitality suite.

11-13—**VidCon. (813) 677-6347.** Airport Holiday Inn, Tampa FL. Membership limited to 100 adults.

11-13—**Anime East. (908) 719-9770.** Hilton, East Brunswick NJ. Japanese animation. US guests.

11-13—**Unification.** Grand Hotel, Birmingham England. Media con (Quantum Leap, Star Trek, etc.).

11-13—**WindyCon (708) 383-6948.** Hyatt Woodfield, near Chicago IL. McCrumb, Wurts, Longyear.

11-14—**Cult TV.** Pontin's Seacroft Holiday Village, Hemsby (near Great Yarmouth) UK. H. Ellison.

12-13—**Imagination. (514) 255-4043.** Hotel Martine, 1155 Guy, Montreal PQ. French-language SF.

12-13—**Fortfest. (301) 738-6550.** Near Washington DC. Anomalous phenomena. The pre-tabloid folks.

17-20—**NordCon. (+49 581) 4 34 60; fax (+49 581) 4 37 37.** Hanover Germany. Guests TBA.

18-20—**PhilCon. (215) 957-4004.** Adam's Mark Hotel, Philadelphia PA. Niven, Cherryh, Jim Burns.

18-20—**Big D Super Collectibles Show. (817) 261-8745.** Sheraton Park Central, Dallas TX.

18-20—**Leonard Nimoy Convention. UK phone (081) 842-3128.** Nottingham, England. Nimoy not there.

25-27—**LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601. (818) 767-9234.** Hilton, Burbank CA.

25-27—**ConCat, 805 College, Knoxville TN 37921. (615) 522-3470.** Effinger, Frankowski, T. Wilson.

25-27—**Darkover Council Meeting, Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 20907. (202) 737-4609.** Towson MD.

25-27—**ConSeal, % Vermaas, J. Wattstraat 13, 1097 DJ, Amsterdam, Netherlands.** Eindhoven, Neth.

26-27—**MidOhioCon, Box 3831, Mansfield OH 44907. (419) 526-0438.** Hyatt, Columbus OH. Comics.

26-27—**LanternCon, 520 Broadway, Fargo ND 58102. (701) 235-2562.** 7 Seas, Bismarck ND. Comics.

## DECEMBER 1994

2-4—**SMOFCon, 5828 Woodman Av. #2, Van Nuys CA 91401.** Burbank CA. Con do-ers talk shop.

## AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection, Box 15340, Washington DC 20003. (301) 345-5186.** Glasgow UK. Worldcon.

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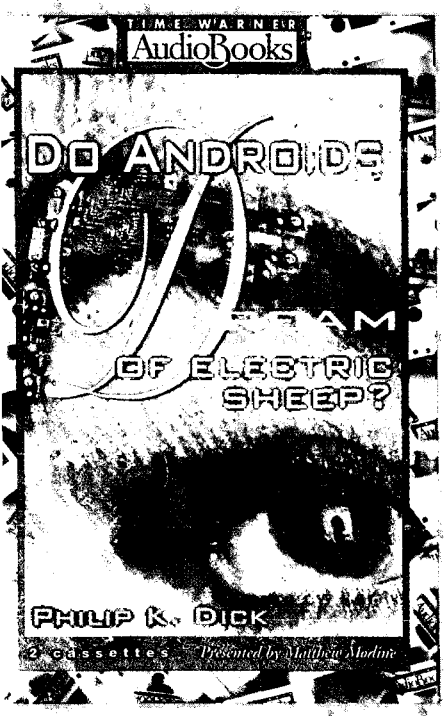


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